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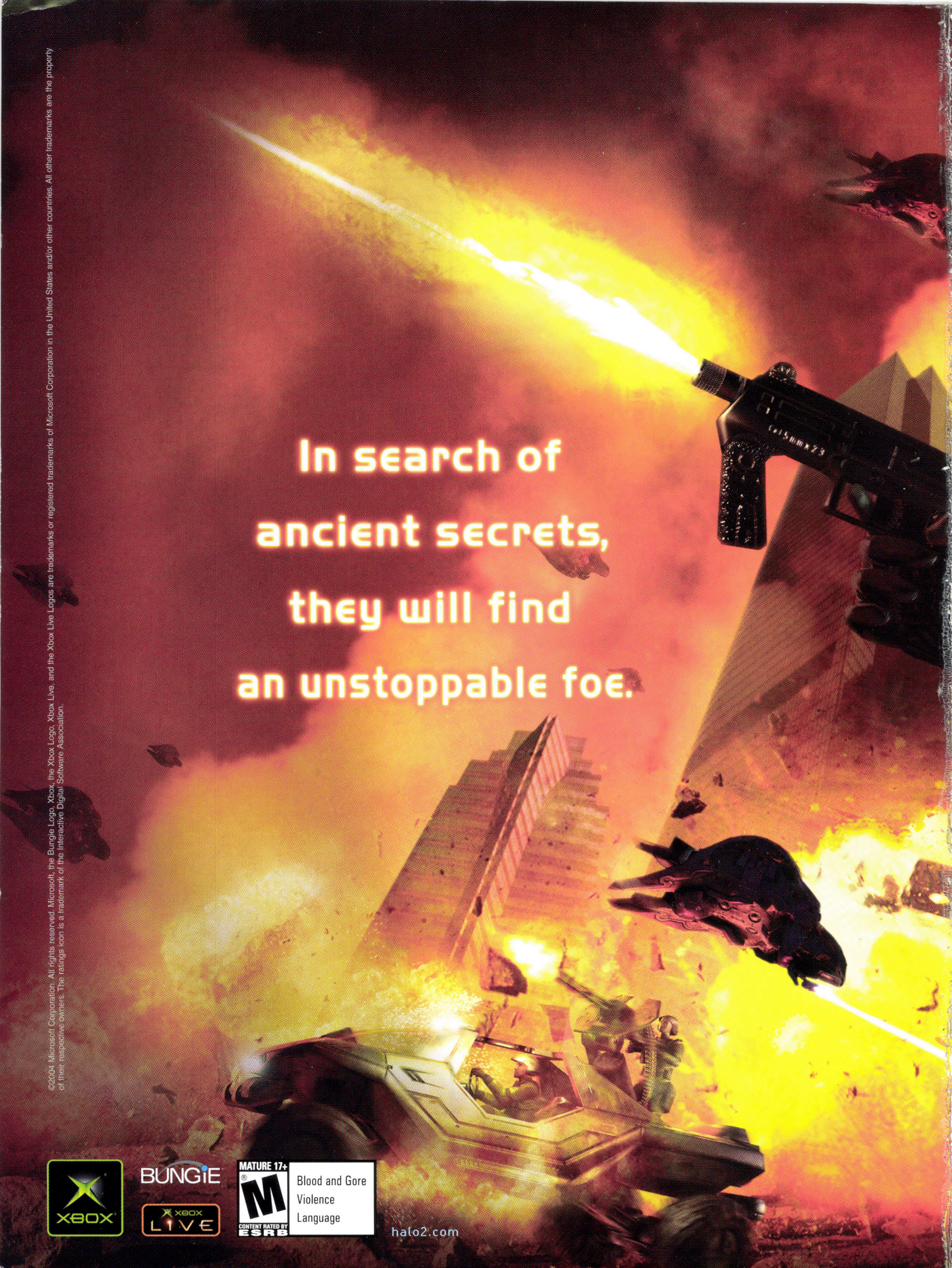


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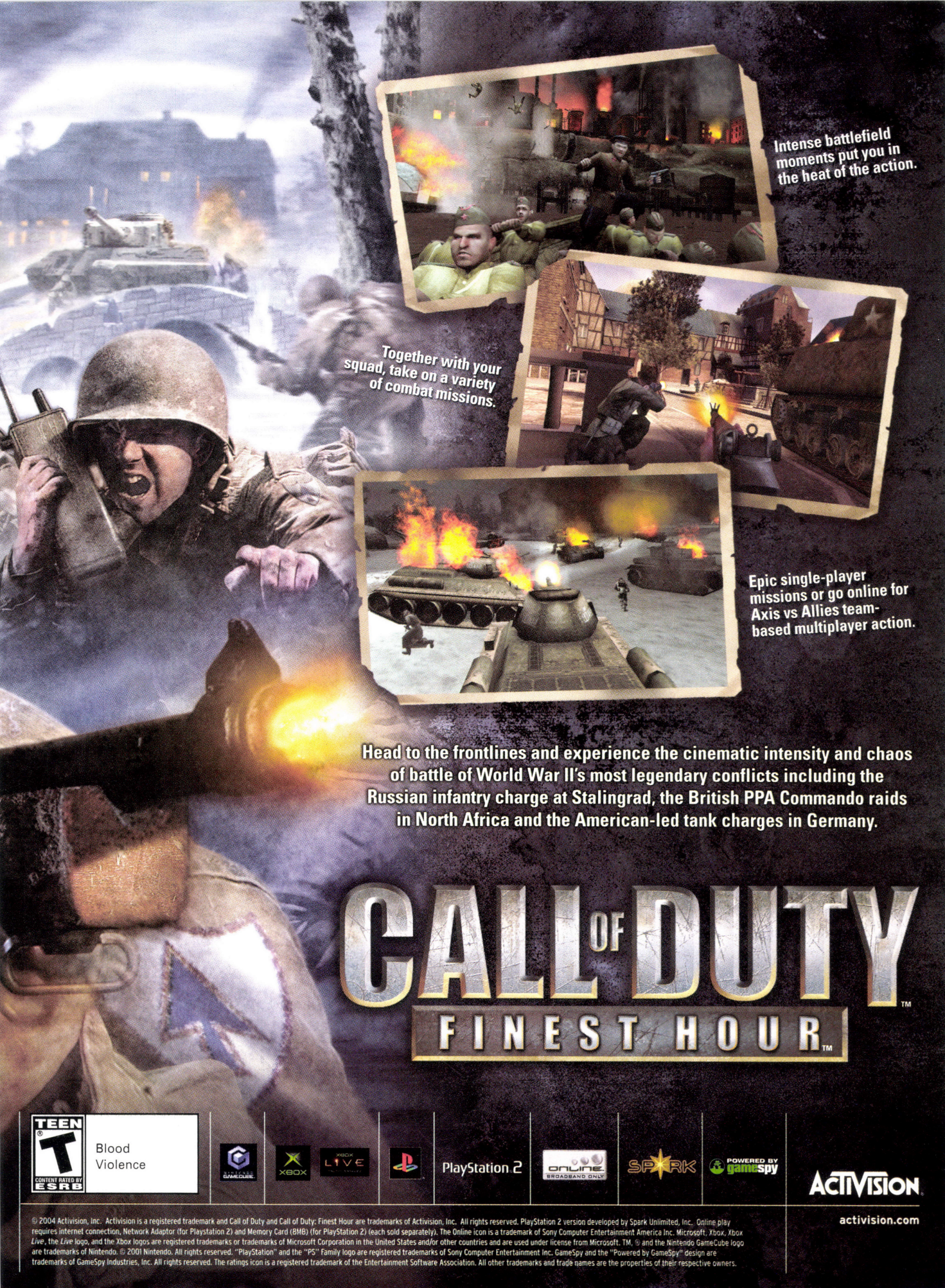
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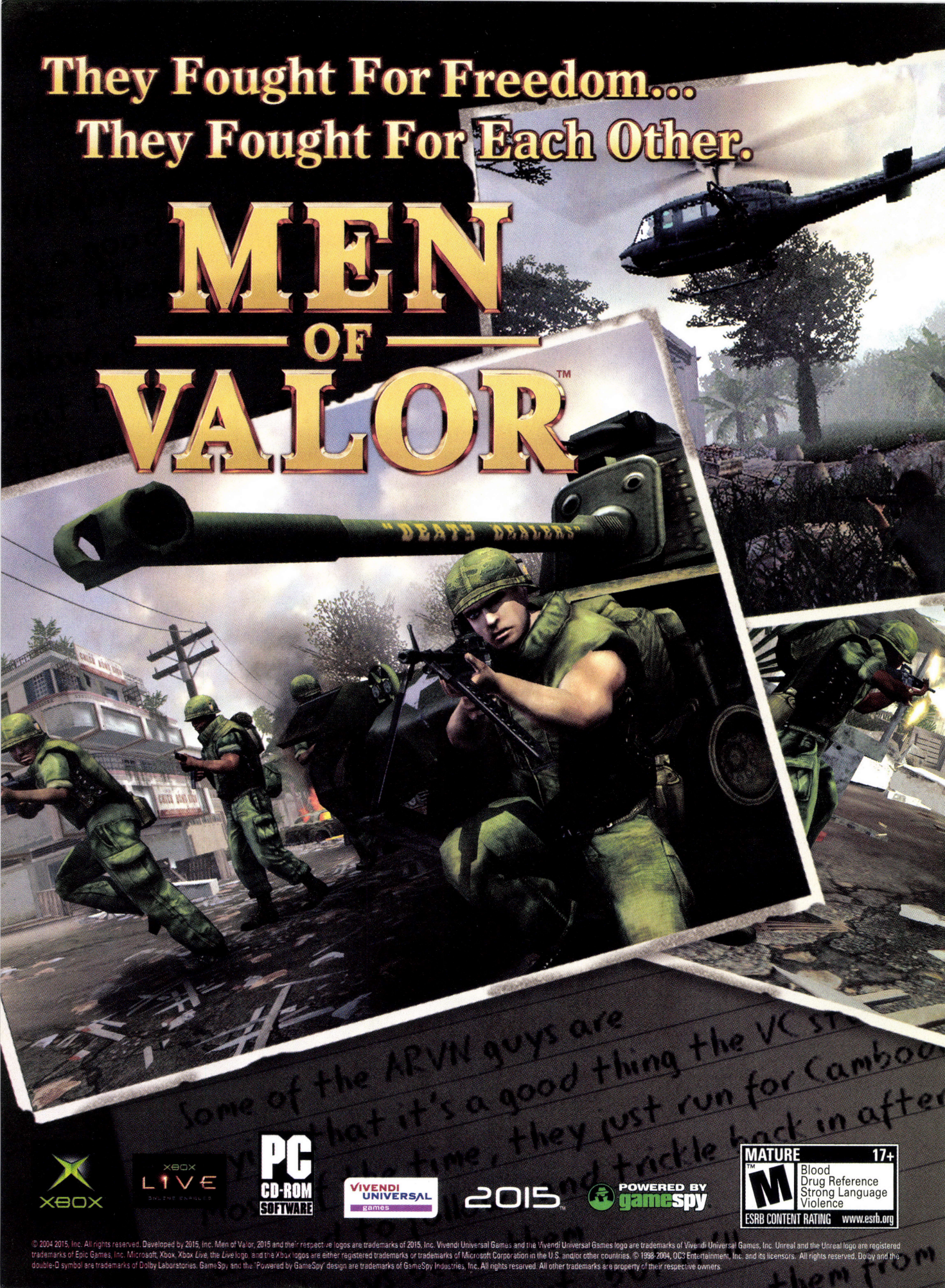
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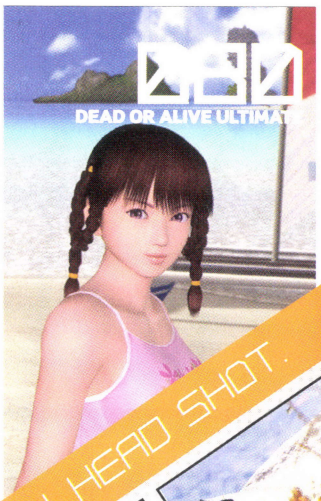
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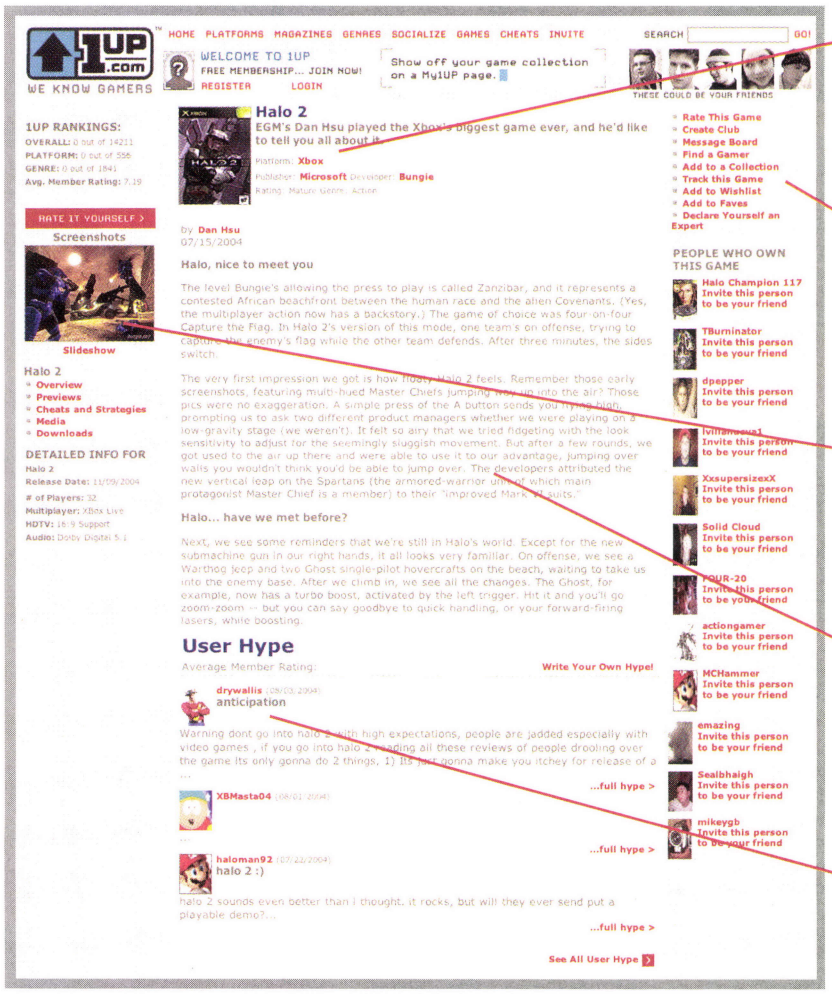
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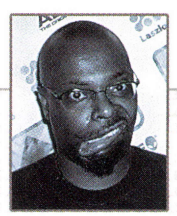
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IT'S HERE

Halo 2 arrives a month early

In a room inside the model-strewn interior of San Francisco's swanky Clift Hotel, *XBN*'s Greg Orlando and a gaggle of other red-eyed game critics sit in total silence, staring at the widescreen televisions in front of them, headphones on. They are playing *Halo 2* to completion. Greg is 12 hours in and gives me the thumbs up (or was it the middle finger?).

It's already way past midnight, and I plan to have a quick look at the game and then return tomorrow when my eyes don't feel like they're made of sand. But when the music begins and those space monks start singing, something visceral grabs me by the throat and pulls me in. Two and a half hours later, I peel myself away from the screen, trigger finger still twitching, and drive home. There have to be 20 stoplights between downtown and my house, and I can't remember one. Or anything else about the 30-minute drive, for that matter.

XBN's exhaustive review of *Halo 2* begins on page 72.

_Simon Cox, Editor-in-Chief



SIMON COX
Editor-in-Chief

As a former member of Her Majesty's Coldstream guards, Simon Cox has surrendered twice to the Belgians, been routed by the Jehovah's Witnesses, and been taken prisoner by the Salvation Army. Now the very model of a modern major general, Cox never keeps his head down and is everywhere—absolutely everywhere—on the battlefield that is *Xbox Nation*.

CHE CHOU
Executive Editor

As the sole possessor of the Amulet of Kalkorth, Che Chou possesses mastery over sodium chloride, using it to overseason his enemy's French fries and needlessly shrink their various cooked meats. So far, 34 separate superhero teams have denied him membership, which is just fine for the other folks at *Xbox Nation*.

CINDY LUM
Managing Editor

Former Spice Girl "Sassy" Cindy Lum now spends her time masterminding new TV shows such as *My Cousin the Tumor*, *It's Raining Carpathians*, and *Stop Already With the Damn Pants*. That pleasant aroma in the air smells a lot like 45 Emmy awards presented by superhunks.

DAVID CHEN
News Editor

Chained by the gods, with his head directly under a hole in the ceiling, David Chen must endure an endless stream of bad videogames dropped from above. His wife, Seran, would be able to help, but she has to fasten papers with no stapler. It's a true tale of irony.



Cover Blokes

An extra-special *XBN* thanks to Sid Garrand and the Nightmare Armor team for suiting up and standing in for the real master chief for our cover. Want your own? Check out nightmarearmorstudios.com for ordering info.

GREG ORLANDO
Reviews Editor

Trained in the impossible by wandering miracle makers, young Greg Orlando has managed to turn burritos into poison gas and can, with a wave of his hook, part the mysterious (it's not water!) puddles that the city of San Francisco is famous for. For his next trick, he'll make getting stabbed with an ice pick 44 times seem like it was only 27.

ANDREW BURWELL
Art Director

The Polka King of Iowa Andrew "Polka" Burwell commands you: Never stop polka-ing. Not even if your pants are on fire in a disco inferno and you've got a boogie fever of 103. Never stop, even if they line you up against the wall with a blindfold. Unless you have something better to do. Then you should probably stop.

ANDREW MENDOZA
Associate Art Director

Superdude Andrew Mendoza spends his time teaching his son Basilio about the finer things in life, most of them having to do with hucking tomatoes at passing cars and sending threatening notes to cereal companies. When they invent clothing that repels baby juices, Mendoza will be the happiest man on earth—or in outer space.

XBN

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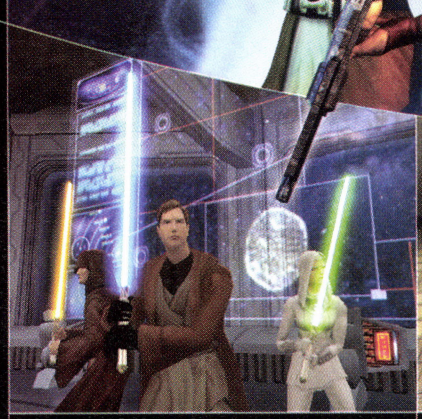


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LETTERS DECEMBER 2004

LETTER OF THE MONTH



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MARK OF OVERHYPE

I just had the thought while I was reading a review of *Fable* that, just perhaps, if Peter Molyneux had kept his trap shut, then reviewers would be reacting not just slightly differently than they are now but would be having a massively different reaction. I mean, any other game that came out with as many different features, graphical effects, moral choices, and voice-overs and included so much length, action, and text would be receiving incredible critical acclaim.

I know you're wondering what I'm talking about, as 1) I've never played the game myself, and 2) the game has an average score of around 88 percent from various publications. However, my theory (which I would like to call the *Mark of Kri* theory) is that some reviewers will sometimes review on a curve: Certain games are rated either higher or lower than the sum of their parts based on hype and/or what the game does or does not have.

I mean, I can clearly see that when a game does not have a feature that is obviously needed, that clearly puts a huge dent in it. Take *Halo*, for instance—if Live had been available when *Halo* came out and the game didn't come with online-enabled multiplayer, we can all see how that would put a huge dent in one's enjoyment of the game. With *Fable*, all I have been hearing is, "Excellent fighting, excellent graphics, excellent length, and amazing customization, but where are the trees?"

Look, I am just trying to illustrate a point that we should begin to think of/review games on the sum of their parts and not on whether certain novelty values are there. Just because a game comes out that's incredibly hush-hush to the gaming public and blindsides them, as *Mark of Kri* did, it should not be given special treatment for having no expectations. *Fable* does not deserve a backlash from the public for delivering not a 10 but a 9.5 instead, only to be thought of as an 8.8 in our minds because we feel almost hurt and betrayed by Big Blue Box and Molyneux.

Tom Jenkins
Midlothian, VA

Like it or not, hype plays a part in the proceedings, Mr. Tom Jenkins, and we call it the *Phantom Menace* theorem. This theorem states: the greater the hype, the more opportunity for disappointment, and, thus, the greater likelihood for such. People build up their hopes until the reality could never be good enough.

Many have invented reasons not to like *Fable*—it's too short, it doesn't allow you to wander through huge expanses for hours, and, apparently, now there are no trees.

The simple fact is, you should go into each and every game you play with one expectation: that you will be entertained. If you start expecting some life-altering, acne-curing, Satan-dispelling experience, well, you've begun to play into the *Phantom Menace* theorem. And weesa say that the big suckah.

Oh, and for making us invent a new theorem, you've won yourself *Xbox Nation*'s coveted Letter of the Month Award—do you want it in the head or the gut? You also win one of the following Xbox games (email us with your choice): *Def Jam Fight for NY*, *ESPN NFL 2K5* or *Terminator 3: Redemption*. Congratulations! //

WANTS A PC, HAS AN XBOX

I am a huge fan of real-time-strategy games. I've played them all, from *Age of Empires* to *Command and Conquer* and, most of all, *StarCraft*. So, as you would imagine, I was really hyped up when I heard that they were making *StarCraft: Ghost* for the Box. You couldn't even imagine the trauma that I later experienced when I found out that it was a shooter and not an army-controlling delight. Now I have played and own *Goblin Commander*, and as far as real-time strategy goes, it's about as entertaining as sitting through a Celine Dion concert.

Anyway, I was wondering if all the real-time-strategy fans out there are ever gonna get to experience a good nongoblin game for Xbox, and if so, who, what, where, and when?

Brant Campanaro
Edwardsburg, MI

It's slim pickings for real-time strategies for Xbox. Beyond *Goblin Commander*, there's only *Aliens vs. Predator: Extinction*—which is definitely more fun than a Celine Dion concert but probably less fun than a Gallagher show, especially if Gallagher, and not the huge watermelon, got smashed with a huge hammer.

TALES...OF THE FUTURE!

Just finished the September issue (#18)—great coverage regarding Oddworld's new game, can't wait to get my hands on it! I do have some suggestions and pointy-finger gestures to make at you regarding the future, though...

1) Be more aware of whether you're placing the developer and publisher in the "Data" box in your previews correctly. I came across three instances of incorrect info in this issue: *Scrapland* is being developed by Mercury Studios and published by Enlight, *Yager* is being brought to the United States by Kemco, not by Yager Studios, and your information for *Second Sight* is completely fallacious. My expectations for any given game are highly influenced by where it's coming from, and the developers deserve proper credit too, you know?

2) How about longer, more detailed individual previews with more screenshots? This was my biggest reason for picking up the magazine, next to the *Oddworld: Stranger* feature. Call me old-fashioned, but I like about a 1:1 paragraph-to-screenshot ratio in my previews. The *Scrapland* preview was just about perfect in

"YOU'VE PRETTY MUCH SLAPPED IN THE FACE TOO-MANY-TO-COUNT FANBOYS ALL ACROSS THE WORLD."

length, and even then, I'm finding myself looking for more information about the actual gameplay elsewhere.
C. Todd

The cauldron is being heated up for the editor boilings.

Done and also done with the writeups for upcoming games. Look for big mother-choking previews and feature stories on the hottest games in the Features and Future sections and shorter, more concise stories on the most newly announced titles in Xpress.

FOOTE NOTE

A good day to you, *XBN* staff. I was wondering if there was any chance of you making a poster of the picture of *Fable* hero Thor Foote giving the ol' one-fingered salute on page 91 of Issue #19 and including it in a future issue. Nothing says "attitude" like a saintly paragon of virtue telling people to sod off.
Joe
Ocala, FL

Fun fact: Thor Foote was named after a scurvy salt in Broderbund's excellent sea adventure *Ancient Art of War at Sea*.

As for your picture, well, Foote has been hanging out with a bad crowd, notably, Sean Penn, Bjork, and Alec Baldwin. Pieces of the last photographer trying to take his picture are still being recovered. With a vacuum.

LORD OF THE ANGRY DANCE

I read Issue #18 only today, so I'm sure you've heard this (or something like it) already. Either the person who wrote "File Under L" that month read only the first 20 pages of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* and formed his (her?) opinion or (more likely) he heard secondhand what the book was about from some moron who read only the first 20 pages.

If the writer had read the whole book, he would have been grateful for those passages of whimsy when hobbits, or elves just as often, are singing about food and other things. *The Fellowship of the Ring* is a very intense and descriptively written book with some genuinely scary, suspenseful, and nail-biting parts. I'm a big fan of the movie, but I'm a much bigger fan of the novel. I'm sure the writer was trying to be funny, but he succeeded only in belittling and insulting one of the most revered works of literature in modern history. J.R.R. Tolkien's *Rings* trilogy is so influential, it has provided almost a blueprint for, um, a heck of a lot of the fantasy books written in the last 30-plus years. You've pretty much slapped in the face too-many-to-count fanboys all across the world.
Michael McCallum

BORN A PARIAH

So I saw your August issue with Karina from Pariah on the cover. I about died! At least I thought there was some slight similarity
Jen Park

Yup, it's you all right, Miss Jen Park. It would be funnier, though, if you looked like the subscription label below Karina.

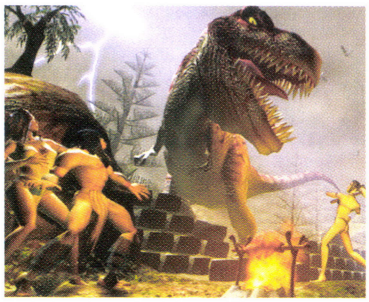


YABBA DABBA DELAYED?

The recent release of *Fable* got me thinking, where is *B.C.*? The game has been in development for a while and was being looked at as a possible Game of the Year candidate a year or two ago, but now all the hype has seemed to die out. So I was wondering, when is it set to be released, and is it still good enough to be Game of the Year, or has time taken its toll on the game?
Billy Shelton
Guthrie, OK

An iron curtain has fallen across *B.C.*, and the game hasn't been seen since before E3. Even this letter, forwarded to Microsoft, received only the vague response that the game was coming in 2005 and more news was forthcoming shortly.

For the record, *Xbox Nation* staff members very nearly voted B.C. Game of the Show for E3 two years ago. It looked that amazing.



PROPS TO DREAMCAST

I enjoyed reading your article "And on the Seventh Day God Created Xbox Live" in October's issue. However, I do not think you gave the Dreamcast's online achievements the credit they deserve.

You start by saying it took Sega an entire year to ship an online game even though the modem was built-in. How long did it take Microsoft? Oh that's right, an entire year!

Also, the service did cost $22 a month, but that was only if you did not have an ISP. It gave you the option to import your own ISP settings and play most of its online games for free. I think the only exception was the *Phantasy Star Online* games, which you have to pay extra for even on Xbox Live.

Content downloads were released for *Sonic Adventure*, which included new challenges with a global scoreboard.

Another achievement was the broadband adapter, making it the first console to connect online through DSL or cable.

To summarize, I am sure you guys knew all this and just couldn't fit it in the space allotted, but maybe you can print this in the next issue to better inform your readers on the history of console online gaming.
Dennis Zegzula
Holbrook, NY

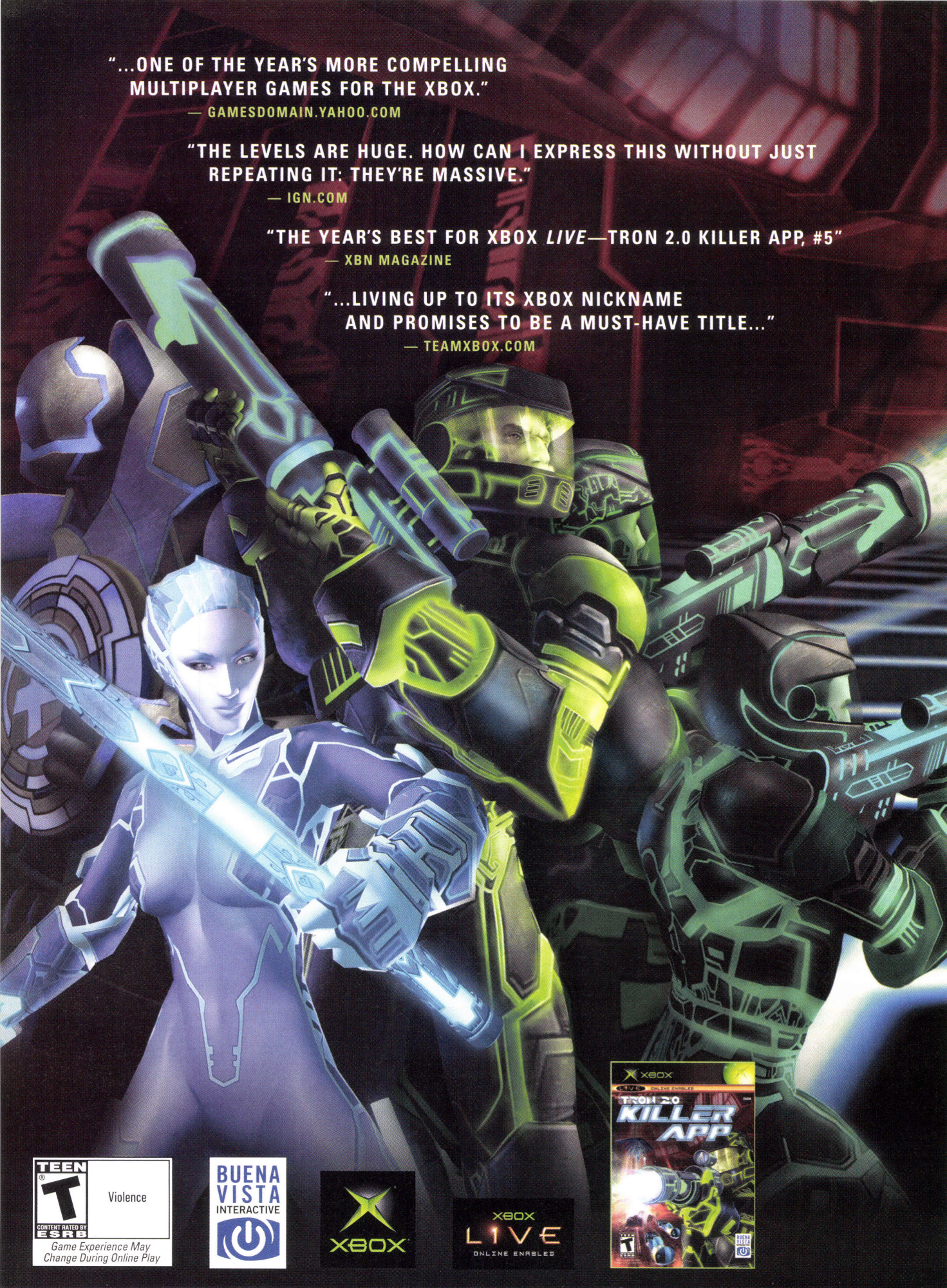
In all fairness, we also forgot to credit former presidential candidate Al Gore for having created the InterWeb. And Rosie O'Donnell for teaching us all how to love again. //

GUY GAME GAFFE

I noticed in Issue #19 when *Xbox Nation* rated *The Guy Game*, the ESRB said it was rated E, when it is really rated M. I thought that it's kind of weird you put a game that shows women's boobies to be rated E. Probably a 10-year-old playboy wanted the game.
Kareem Awad
Baton Rouge, LA

The error was entirely *XBN*'s. *The Guy Game* is rated M, and the editors in question have been viciously assaulted by a squad of sassy robots hand-picked for their editor-mauling skills.




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— GAMESDOMAIN.YAHOO.COM
"THE LEVELS ARE HUGE. HOW CAN I EXPRESS THIS WITHOUT JUST REPEATING IT: THEY'RE MASSIVE."
— IGN.COM
"THE YEAR'S BEST FOR XBOX LIVE—TRON 2.0 KILLER APP, #5"
— XBN MAGAZINE
"...LIVING UP TO ITS XBOX NICKNAME AND PROMISES TO BE A MUST-HAVE TITLE..."
— TEAMXBOX.COM
TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Violence
Game Experience May Change During Online Play
BUENA VISTA INTERACTIVE
XBOX
XBOX LIVE
ONLINE ENABLED
XBOX
TRON 2.0
KILLER APP

"THIS FALL, THE XBOX GETS ITS NEXT KILLER APP."

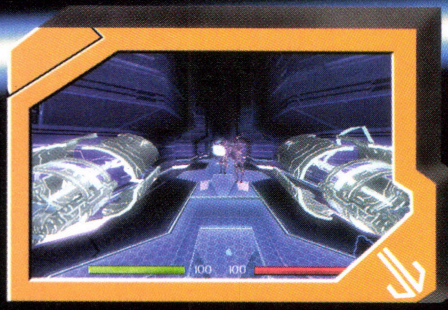
– OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE



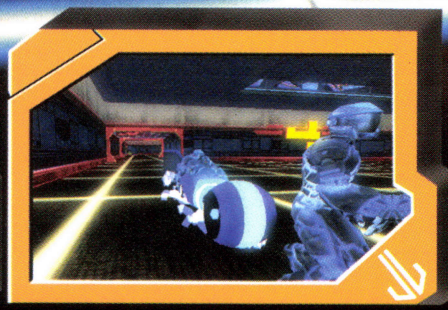
TRON 2.0 KILLER APP

LIVE BY THE CODE. DIE BY THE CODE.

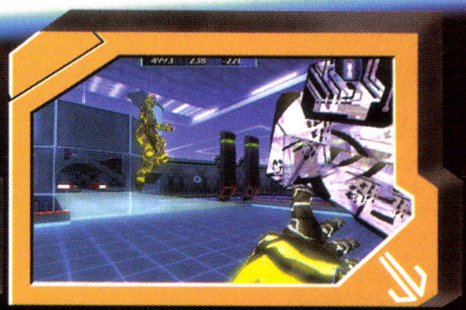
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TOKYO GAME SHOW

Xbox attracts gamers in the land of the rising yen



KUBRICK LIVES
Having "Lego-sized" nearly every pop icon from the past 30 years, Japanese toy company Mediacom has now turned its sights on games, including *Halo 2*, which makes its pint-sized debut later this year.

At one time the most important and telling trade show for interactive entertainment, Japan's Tokyo Game Show (TGS) has fallen on comparatively hard times. As the Japanese gaming industry struggles to recover from its recent recession, TGS has gone from being an oasis of new announcements and hardware unveilings to not much more than a stopgap between Electronic Entertainment Expos in Los Angeles each year.

Still, Microsoft knows the importance of gaining a solid foothold in the Japanese gaming market, where domestic shipments in that country amounted to a respectable $7.06 billion in 2003, and where capturing the hearts of Japanese gamers might also mean enticing platform-busting franchises like *Final Fantasy* or *Metal Gear Solid* from triple-A talent. Which is why for the fourth year in a row, the Xbox made a valiant attempt at TGS to educate a gaming culture where first-person shooters are met with nausea rather than excitement.

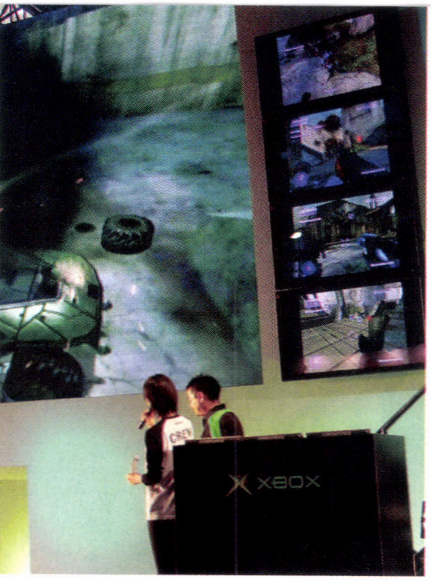
Cultural Disconnect

Although it's easy to write off Japanese gaming as all but irrelevant in a generation dominated by Western giants like *Halo 2* and *Grand Theft Auto*, it isn't until you're wandering amidst the organized chaos of TGS that you realize how strangely incongruous the Xbox library is to the Japanese mindset.

It would appear that in 2004, as videogames become continually more mainstream, gaming's great divide between East and West has become—more than ever—one of cultural barriers. A glimpse at the TGS show floor reveals the collective interests of Japanese gamers.

Folks were lined up in droves to check out third-person action titles with anime tie-ins, pet-monster simulators, puzzle games featuring cutesy blobs with googly eyes, and (gasp!) mobile (read: cell phone) games. It's enough to make *gaijin* gamers scratch their heads in utter confusion.

Diametrically opposed were most of the Xbox titles on parade in Microsoft's corner of TGS. Showgoers' reactions to Western favorites such as *Jade Empire*, *Conker: Live & Reloaded*, and *Fable* were admittedly lukewarm at best. In fact, at times it seemed many Xbox kiosks were occupied by European or American journalists who hadn't already gotten their fill of, say, the destructible delicatessen that is





Two Japanese gamers play *Dead or Alive Ultimate*—perhaps the only game they really care about.



VIDEO KILLED THE RADIO STAR

TGS held one surprise for Xbox owners this year: a video chat camera peripheral called—wait for it—Video Chat. Essentially a webcam you plug into a controller port, the unit allows you to broadcast video out to users on your Live friends list. Conversations with multiple users can be split into windows, with everyone able to see each other's mugs in real time. The cam is so simple and cool, it's a no-brainer that Microsoft ought to bring it Stateside—yet, it currently has no plans to do so.







ALTHOUGH THERE'S A GENERAL FEELING OF FORFEITURE WHEN IT COMES TO JAPAN THIS GENERATION, MICROSOFT IS DETERMINED TO PAVE THE WAY FOR XBOX 2 COME 2006.

MechAssault 2. But for all the Xbox titles that were lost in translation, a few games—such as *Metal Wolf Chaos* (see the feature on page 62)—garnered decent Japanese buzz.

Xbox Ambassadors

Like ice cream and puppies, everybody loves *Halo 2*—even in Japan. Both the curious and the enthusiast crowded the *Halo 2* kiosks, which ran a continuous pre-recorded demo of new stuff to look for in multiplayer, as well as rotating rounds of capture the flag for up to 16 players. For a nation with less than 5 percent Xbox penetration, the Japanese handled their hands-on time with *Halo 2* admirably, with some players occasionally showing off CTF skills worthy of tournament play.

Other games that transcended the cultural divide included, surprisingly, *Forza Motorsport*, which was hooked up to a Thrustmaster racing wheel (sadly, sans the force feedback), running on eight deluxe sit-down cabinets.

In the microcosm of TGS, *Forza* itself looked and felt a notch better than any of its previous outings, making the game a temporary contender to *Gran Turismo 4*'s sim-racing crown. Microsoft declined to comment when asked whether *Forza* would come Stateside packaged with the Thrustmaster racing controller. An educated guess, however, points to a probable release of some type of wheel to complete the *Forza* experience.

Staying the Course

Perseverance—that would be the one word to summarize Microsoft's Xbox exhibit at TGS. At center stage in the Microsoft booth were hourly demos of games, including heavily marketed platformer *Blinx 2: Masters of Time & Space* and high-concept action hybrid *Full Spectrum Warrior*. Highlights such as a *Halo 2* CTF tournament and the incredible fanfare of Tecmo's Master Ninja Tournament both drew sizable crowds.

Unlike Sony, which dominated the proceedings with a boisterous showing of its portable PSP system, Microsoft had no new announcements and practically zero new first-party titles to boast. But like its holiday lineup this winter, Xbox was nothing if not solid. Although there's a general feeling of forfeiture when it comes to gaining ground in Japan this generation, Microsoft is determined to pave the way for Xbox 2 come 2006. //



PLAYING DRESS UP

You haven't seen cosplay (the act of dressing up like your favorite gaming or anime characters) until you've been to Japan. It's a scene unto itself with a unique sense of decorum. Rule one: Take many pics of each other.

MASTER NINJA TOURNAMENT

The best of the best face a most grueling test



After the hellish 15-minute series of boss battles, winner Yasunori Otsuka (pictured above) stood—aquiver with a serious case of nerves—for a Q&A session with the audience. From the flurry of questions came forth his answer: "I'm going to Disneyland."

Tecmo's Master Ninja Tournament World Championship took place on September 25, and for the most part it was a smashing success. Five finalists from around the world—representing Scotland, the United States, Canada, and Japan—converged at the Tokyo Game Show to weed out the most lethal *Ninja Gaiden* player on the planet. The winner? Yasunori Otsuka, scoring a big hometown win for Japan.

Hundreds gathered around Microsoft's Xbox booth to witness the match as developer Team Ninja unveiled yet another extension to *Ninja Gaiden—Hurricane Pack Volume II*, which was built specifically for the event. Players were positioned on catwalks above the crowd, and the onscreen action was projected on the booth's main video screen. Team Ninja front man Tomonobu Itagaki was on hand to help cohost the event and provide running commentary, warning, "We made some new monsters just for this tournament, and they're pretty tough."

The new mode features one new arena and a number of consecutive boss battles, ending with a remixed version of the memorable Alma. Finalists were tasked with defeating each boss character within a 15-minute time limit and scoring the most karma points along the way. In an interesting twist, players were deducted a whopping 50,000 karma points each time their character died, upping the excitement with each death bringing gasps and winces from the audience.

The previous night, the three overseas finalists were flown to Tokyo and quickly escorted to a small banquet at Century Plaza Tower, across from Shinjuku's Times Square. Each player was allowed one practice round with the new download before the real battle took place the following day. Despite being the guest of honor, Itagaki himself—presumably to put the finishing touches on *Dead or Alive Ultimate*—failed to show.

In a fantastic display of showmanship, three out of the five players defeated Alma within the allotted time. Otsuka snagged a victory in the very last few seconds of the match, earning 734,696 points. Moments later, a visibly excited Otsuka was awarded a special plaque—and the honor of being the world's first master ninja—by Itagaki himself. //







RULE THE ROOST

Iron Phoenix to support Live 3.0

Wushu fanatics may finally get to perform their *Hidden Dragon* dreams on Live in early 2005. Sammy Studios has announced that *Iron Phoenix*, an intriguing 16-player online fighting game, will make use of Live 3.0 features to enhance the experience. Already shaping up as a sort sort of *Soul Calibur/Unreal Tournament* hybrid, this addition could go a long way in fostering the squad-based play typically associated with online first-person shooters.

Clan building and tournament hosting capabilities, especially, could play a key role in fostering a sense of community. Along with making clan formation a snap, players will be able to use a special Gamertag to identify members, easily send updates to existing teammates, and even hold try-outs and interviews to qualify new members.

Once ready to compete, *Iron Phoenix* clans can organize and host tournaments for up to eight teams, track challengers and their stats, and then post tournament results, all through the Live service. Envisioning a flurry of acrobatic combos chained from one fighter to another as two disciplined groups engage each other isn't hard. Whether such scenarios will actually come to fruition—or simply go up in flames—has yet to be seen. //

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– GAMESPY



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CALENDAR: DECEMBER 2004

MORE STUFF, LESS FLUFF

FORGET-ME-NOTS:

IMPORT ALERT!

What is it about wolves and mechs anyway? From Software takes on the giant mech genre in *Metal Wolf Chaos*, available this month in Japan. It was one of the show-stoppers in the Microsoft booth at TGS this year and should be well worth the trip to the import shop.

12.26.04

It's tradition—no one can resist the siren song of the mall, where you'll exchange your three copies of *American Chopper* from long-forgotten relatives and spend the gift certificates from the rest who weren't sure if you had *Halo 2* or not.

12.31.04

New Year's resolutions date back thousands of years, and people have probably been breaking them just as long. The Babylonians threw an 11-day party to ring in the New Year 4,000 years ago, and to this day, no one knows what that auld lang syne is all about, but that never stopped anyone from muttering through some of the words at midnight. See you in '05.

12.01 WEDNESDAY

GUNGRIFFON

PUBLISHER: TECMO // DEVELOPER: GAME ARTS



GunGriffon: Allied Strike emerges from the tomb of the unknown giant armored mech game today. These steel steeds stomp across the postapocalyptic battlefield in both a single-player campaign and Live online play—all without crushing your wallet under the weight of their controller.

12.07 TUESDAY

STAR WARS: KOTOR II

PUBLISHER: LUCASARTS // DEVELOPER: OBSIDIAN

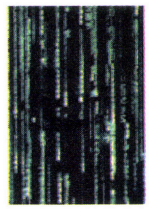


The *Ebon Hawk* wings its way back to the Xbox today in ***Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II***. A fallen-away Jedi stands atop her passenger list, which also includes everyone's favorite droid duo HK-47 and T3-M4, along with new friends united to save the Republic from collapsing beneath the designs of the latest dark lord—Darth Sion.

12.07 TUESDAY

THE ULTIMATE MATRIX COLLECTION

FORMAT: DVD // STUDIO: WARNER BROS.



Red, blue, or whatever color, choking down even one more pill might be impossible, much less the 10-DVD ***Ultimate Matrix*** pill that comes out today. A couple of good alternatives also hit store shelves this day, including ***Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story*** and ***The Bourne Supremacy***.

12.08 WEDNESDAY

CONKER: LIVE & RELOADED

PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT // DEVELOPER: RARE



Rare has enough of Microsoft's nuts stashed away to keep its raunchy squirrel Conker holed up through the winter and well past this once-hoped-for release date; ideally, that won't be the case. Regardless, when he does come out of hibernation—live and reloaded—the team-based squirrels versus tediz multiplayer online play will knock the sleep right out of his eyes.

12.14 TUESDAY

LOTR: ROTK

FORMAT: DVD // STUDIO: WARNER BROS.



With no ***Lord of the Rings*** theatrical release to continue the holiday tradition of the past three years, the ***Platinum Series Special Extended Version*** of the third and final chapter in Peter Jackson's magnum opus arrives just in time with over 50 minutes of new footage. Other blockbuster DVDs arriving today for the giving season include ***Collateral*** and ***I, Robot***.

12.15 WEDNESDAY

DOOM 3

PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION // DEV: VICARIOUS VISIONS



The pre-Christmas launch window is starting to rapidly close. And if the doomed expedition to Mars on Xbox has not launched by now, then the countdown likely moves to next year. Like their spacebound brothers, the U.S. Marines may also miss this planned date for their assault on holiday retail shelves, code-named ***Close Combat: First to Fight***.

12.25 SATURDAY

BLADE: TRINITY

FORMAT: THEATRICAL // STUDIO: NEW LINE CINEMA



Along with some holiday, today happens to be one of the year's biggest days at the box office. Action fans should forgive the videogame version of the series' last film and check out Wesley Snipes kicking major vampire ass in ***Blade: Trinity***. Something less violent? Give ***Ocean's 12*** or ***Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events*** a look.

12.29 WEDNESDAY

MECHASSAULT 2

PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT // DEVELOPER: DAY 1 STUDIO



The established leader of the giant robot pack returns today in ***MechAssault 2: Lone Wolf***. Thanks to your newfound freedom to jump from the cockpit and grab another ride, including "jacking" an enemy's mech, this ***Wolf*** shouldn't be lonely on Live for too long...

12.31 FRIDAY

WWII PARATROOPERS

PUBLISHER: TBD // DEVELOPER: BATTLEBORNE

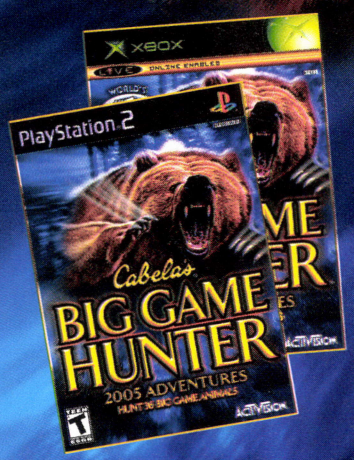


Combat Elite: WWII Paratroopers had its chute on but didn't quite make it out the door before the good ship Acclaim went down. With the game finished, there's a good chance Battleborne will find a publisher to help ***Combat Elite*** get its jump in before the end of the year.



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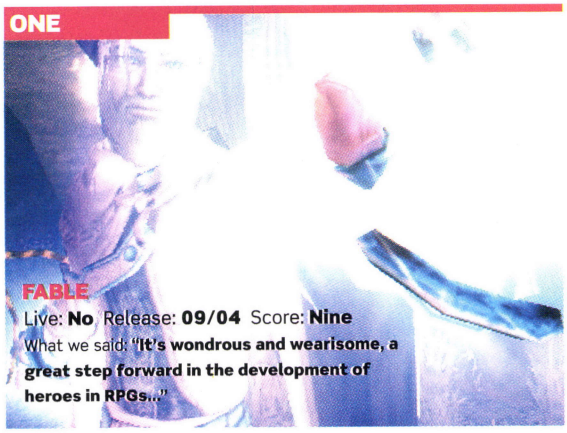
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Violence
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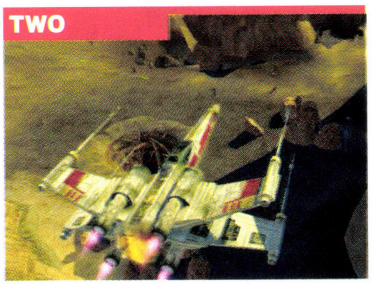
TOP 10: XBOX BEST-SELLERS (AS OF SEPT. 2004)

ONE



FABLE
Live: **No** Release: **09/04** Score: **Nine**
What we said: **"It's wondrous and wearisome, a great step forward in the development of heroes in RPGs..."**

TWO



STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT
Live: **Yes** Release: **09/04** Score: **Eight**
What we said: **"In the category of Good Clean Fun, it takes home the prize."**

THREE



BURNOUT 3: TAKEDOWN
Live: **Yes** Release: **09/04** Score: **Ten**
What we said: **"*Burnout 3: Takedown* is, hands down, the best arcade racer ever made."**

FOUR

ESPN NHL 2K5
Live: **Yes**
Release: **09/04**
Score: **Seven**
What we said: **"For a ridiculously low $19.99, you absolutely get your money's worth and more..."**

FIVE

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005
Live: **Yes**
Release: **09/04**
Score: **Eight**
What we said: **"The new features are strictly for serious golf nuts..."**

SIX

ESPN NFL 2K5
Live: **Yes**
Release: **09/04**
Score: **Nine**
What we said: **"This year, the *Madden NFL* crew has a real fight on its hands."**

SEVEN

X-Men Legends
Live: **Yes**
Release: **09/04**
Score: **Eight**
What we said: **"This is fan service—and cooperative gaming—done right."**

EIGHT

NASCAR 2005
Live: **Yes**
Release: **09/04**
Score: **Eight**
What we said: **"It's a NASCAR game that not only hardcore fans will love—it's one even you would want to play."**

NINE

Def Jam Fight for New York
Live: **No**
Release: **09/04**
Score: **Eight**
What we said: **"...lacks the grace or charisma to become a true heavyweight champion."**

TEN

Street Racing Syndicate
Live: **Yes**
Release: **09/04**
Score: **Six**
What we said: **"It's the gameplay that disappoints."**

FAME...OR SHAME?



FAME!

Halo'd be thy name
Surprise, surprise, surprise—the biggest gaming event of the year proves to be every bit worth the hype. Kudos and more to Bungie for outdoing itself.

SHAME!

Lackluster licensing
For every *Chronicles of Riddick*, there's a *Robotech: Invasion* or—as is the case this month—*King Arthur*. Tune in next month to see which side of the fence EA's *Rings*-based RPG—*The Third Age*—falls on.

TOP 10 U.K.

Sales figures from the land of tea and biscuits

1. **STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT** — The (British) Empire Strikes Back
2. **TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 2005** — Ol' faithful takes another swing
3. **BURNOUT 3: TAKEDOWN** — Criterion's righteous racer takes the lead...
4. **OUTRUN 2** — ...while this retro ride slips behind
5. **DEF JAM FIGHT FOR NEW YORK** — Just like a visit to the Big Apple!
6. **COLIN MCRAE RALLY 2005** — Gosh, this road seems familiar...
7. **PSI-OPS: THE MINDGATE CONSPIRACY** — Mind the mindgate, son!
8. **RAINBOW SIX 3: BLACK ARROW** — Blood is red, arrows are black...
9. **CONFLICT: VIETNAM** — No conflict here: War is hell
10. **TERMINATOR 3: THE REDEMPTION** — A chip off the old (school) block

TOP 10 JAPAN

Sales figures from the land of tea and sushi

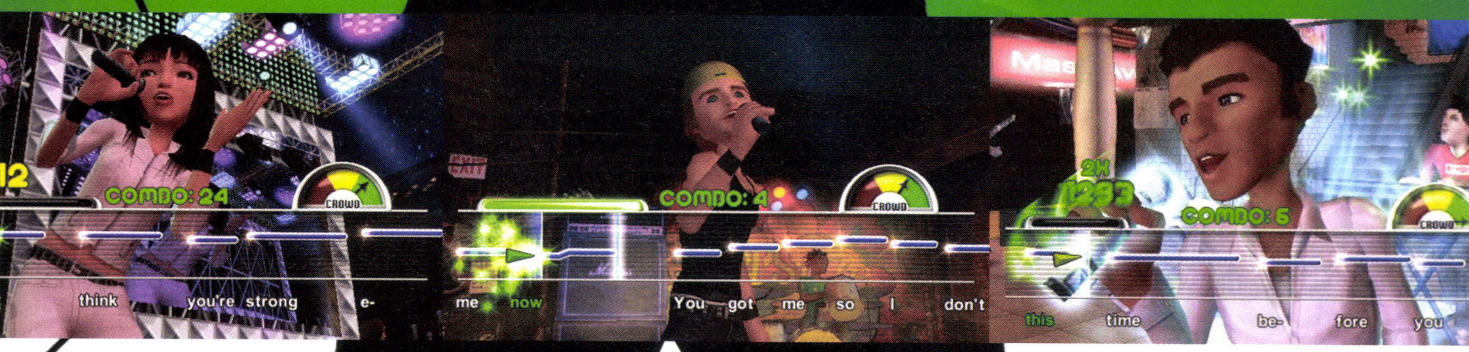
1. **PHANTOM DUST** — U.S. release? Still has a ghost of a chance
2. **STAR WARS: JEDI ACADEMY** — School was never like this!
3. **FULL SPECTRUM WARRIOR** — The thinking man's murder simulator
4. **OTOGI 2** — Cherry blossoms never go out of style
5. **HALO** — Have you heard? There's a sequel!
6. **DEAD OR ALIVE 3** — Still looking good, after all these years
7. **GRAND THEFT AUTO: DOUBLE PACK** — Do the crime, do the time. Twice
8. **CRIMSON SKIES: HRTR** — Crimson skies, aviator's delight
9. **DEAD MAN'S HAND** — Beats our pair of jacks
10. **DINO CRISIS 3** — This fossil should have stayed extinct...

Numbers courtesy of Media Create [m-create.com]

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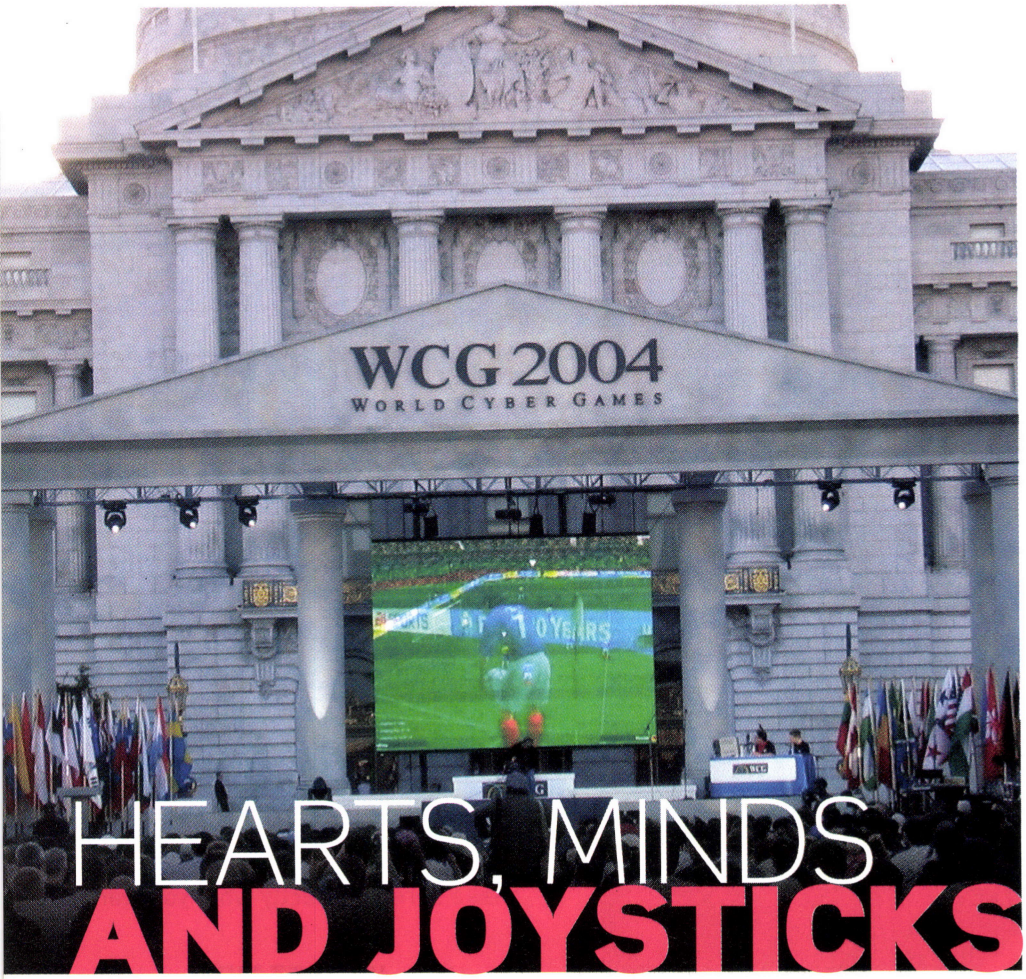
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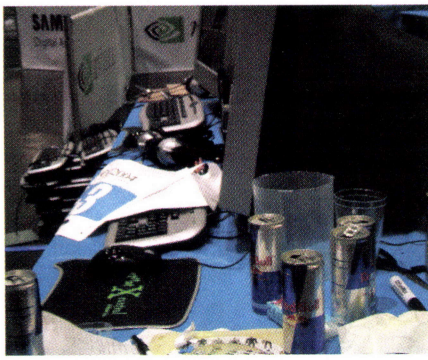
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HEARTS, MINDS AND JOYSTICKS

International war is waged as the biggest professional gaming tournament in the world comes Stateside

To the victors...

Garnering the most gold medals was the Netherlands, with wins in *PGR2*, *WarCraft III*, and *Unreal Tournament*. Matt Leto (USA) took home his second gold medal for *Halo* and $20,000.

The Bill Graham Civic Auditorium in San Francisco is packed with hundreds of high-end PCs and consoles laid out in tidy arrays. Enormous flatscreens hang from the ceiling, displaying important matches in real time for the crowds to observe. The lights are dimmed, and the monitors just bright enough to reveal sweat on the brows of some of the best gamers in the world.

These young men and women are facing off against one another in the most competitive games around—*Counter-Strike*, *WarCraft III*, *Project Gotham Racing 2*, and *Halo*, to name but a few.

Try to recall the tension of playing your favorite game against a similarly skilled friend; now multiply that feeling by hundreds of opponents, four straight days of competition, enough Red Bull to kill a horse, and a grand prize of $50,000. Suffice it to say, things here are more than a bit stressful.

For the first time in the event's five-year history, the United States played host to the World Cyber Games, which descended on the city of San Francisco for four chilly days in mid-October.

For those unfamiliar with to admittedly enigmatic world of "competitive gaming," WCG is the largest and most prestigious event of its kind, bringing together 700 champion gamers from 64 countries to compete for world titles and cold, hard cash. Including prizes from national finals, global winnings for the World Cyber Games has been estimated at $2.5 million for the 2004 calendar year, and more than $400,000 for the San Francisco championships alone. //

More info at: worldcybergames.com

News Bits

Tidbits of news for you and me

BIG NEWS

EA Sports Big expands roster

Hell-bent on proving to the world that every sport can be extreme, Electronic Arts has announced that its enormously successful *FIFA* franchise is next in line for *Street* treatment. This blend of real-world athletes, freestyle soccer, and rules-free arcade-style action is due next year, and—like its siblings *NBA Street* and *NFL Street*—it will likely sport plenty of attitude, dude.

FIBS AND FABLES

Lionhead's "Master Brain" apologizes

Celebrated game designer Peter Molyneux posted a candid and personal apology regarding Big Blue Box's ambitious action-RPG *Fable* on Lionhead's website. "Although we jump up and down in glee about the fabulous concepts and features we're working on, I will not mention them to the outside world until we've implemented and tested them and they are a reality," Molyneux said.

MIDWAY OWNS

Inevitable Entertainment acquired

Inevitable Entertainment now has an even better reason to finish up *Area 51* for publisher Midway on time and as well as possible. The Austin-based developer—previously responsible for *Tribes: Aerial Assault*—has been acquired by Midway. Shares of stock were issued to key employees in order to encourage retention; *Area 51* is due to ship in the first half of 2005.

ONE MAN. MANY WEAPONS. INFINITE DESTRUCTION.

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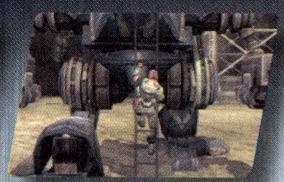
Microsoft game studios

DAY 1 STUDIOS

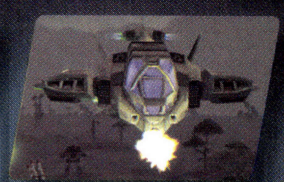
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TEEN
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Blood
Violence
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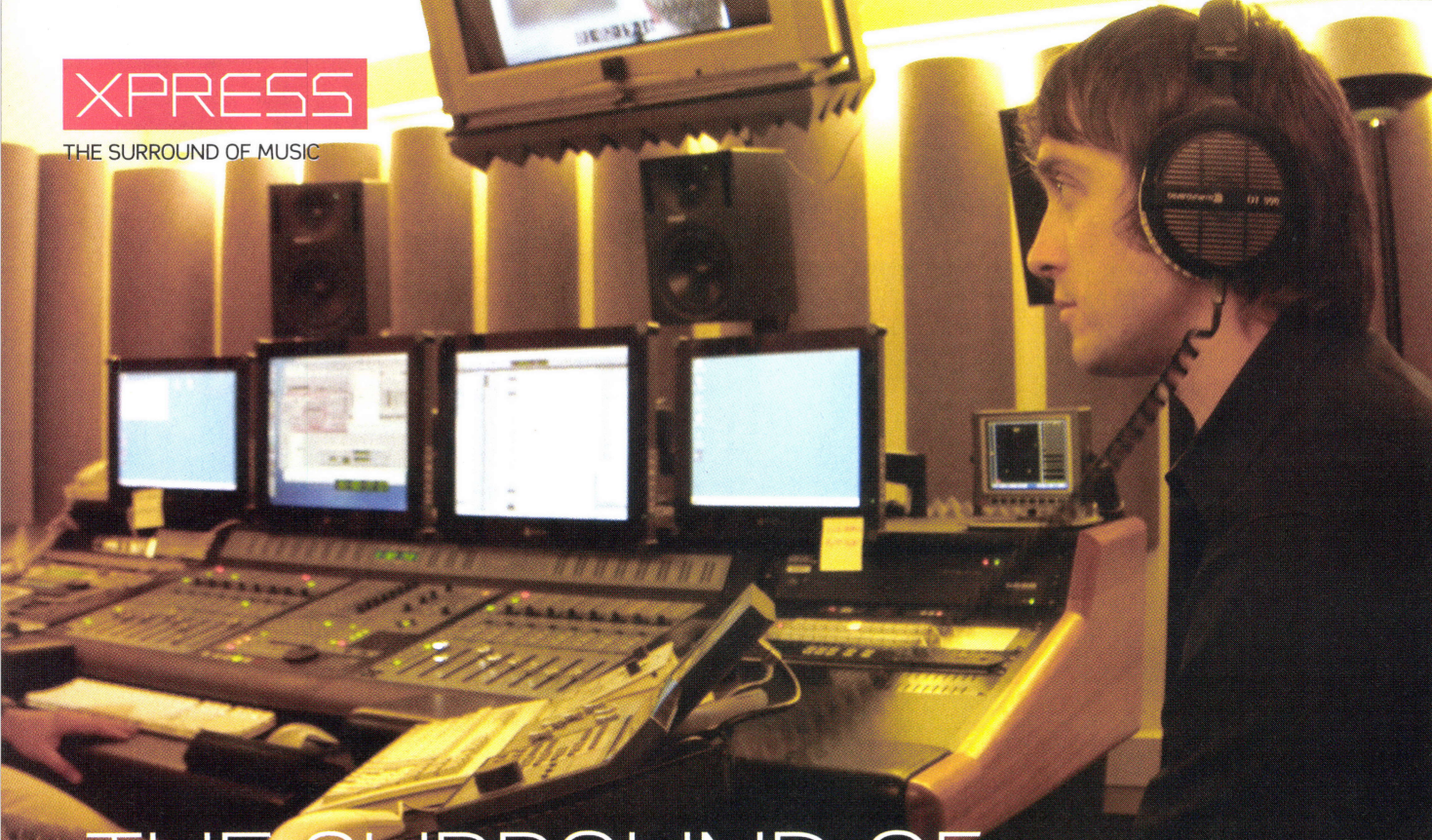
xbox.com/mechassault2

MECHASSAULT 2 LONE WOLF

XBOX

it's good to play together

XBOX LIVE



THE SURROUND OF MUSIC

Xbox is the first and only videogame console to support Dolby Digital 5.1 Surround Sound. Welcome to the wonderful world of aural indulgence.

Situated in the heart of San Francisco's Potrero Hill district, and sharing its block with such interactive heavy-hitters as Sega and Macromedia, Dolby Laboratories is essentially the world's epicenter for progressive sound technology. The building hosts some of the most pioneering minds in the industry, not to mention a staggering array of sound-proofed rooms, gear (from near-ancient analog reel-to-reel recorders to top-of-the-line audio setups), and nearly a thousand patents. Nearly every piece of equipment or software with the Dolby logo on its box has come through these offices for certification at one point or another, and the complex houses one of the finest screening rooms in the world, painstakingly designed for the explicit purpose of creating the ultimate sound environment.

It may sound like hyperbole coming from a platform-specific magazine such as this one, but believe the hype: With its built-in support for Dolby Digital 5.1, Xbox has the best sound processing of any single videogame platform in history. Ever. This includes the PlayStation 2, the coin-op arcade machine, and the modern-day PC. It has essentially helped revolutionize the use of sound design in games, and is something every Xbox owner should be taking full advantage of; if the modern-day videogame's primary concern is to immerse the player in its world, true multi-directional surround sound represents a massive leap forward.

Sitting down for a session of *The Chronicles of Riddick* with Jack Buser, Dolby's manager of game development relations and all-around sound guru, helps explain quite a bit about just what Dolby does for games. "What you have onscreen here is all of these sound-emitting objects," Buser says, pointing to a busted steam pipe in the corner of a prison cell. "So what the sound designer says is, 'OK, there's ambient noise coming from this direction, and this guy's making this sound over here,' and then he uses sound geometry to figure out where to place those sounds in the 5.1 soundfield. He starts with true three-dimensional audio, and then says, 'How am I gonna render that down to a 5.1-channel system' [as opposed to that of the human ear, which is essentially infinite]. The Xbox is absolutely the only console that can do this—and that's just a taste of it."

Of course, things weren't always as easy as they are now. As we wander through the small Dolby Museum, Buser explains that Dolby's roots in games extend all the way back to 1993, when *King Arthur's World*, a Super Nintendo title from Jaleco, was the first game to incorporate four-channel Dolby Surround Sound into its soundtrack.

Soon after, game developers learned that Dolby Surround could actually be manipulated during gameplay. The technique—then called Interactive Dolby Surround Sound—was used in several 3DO, PC, and PlayStation games in the mid 1990s, including EA's *Need for Speed*, NovaLogic's *F-22 Lightning II*, Psygnosis' *Krazy Ivan*, and Prolific Publishing's legendary *Return Fire*.

In 1992, Dolby Laboratories unleashed what was to become the defining surround sound audio standard of its time—Dolby Digital 5.1. This was true three-dimensional sound, achieved via five individual speakers—a center channel, front left and right speakers, and two rear speakers placed behind the listener—and it represented an »



EFFECTING CHANGE.

The list of audio effects built into the Xbox surround sound libraries is huge, but the most regularly used is probably the reverbs. "The Xbox has multichannel reverbs—meaning that if you have a wall that's really hard, it tends to be reflective and make that *psssshhh* reverb sound," Buser explains. "The Xbox can actually model, somewhat, how a room actually works in surround. You can adjust the parameters on the reverb to suit the room and the building materials." What this essentially means is a more immersive, more dynamic gameplay environment. "To a game player, it's those kinds of subtle things that are gonna draw you in to that game and make you feel like you're actually in this metal prison cell or whatever...very subconscious stuff." //

3 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT SETTING UP YOUR DOLBY DIGITAL 5.1 SYSTEM

1 THE DUH FACTOR:
It may seem obvious, but many people forget to set their Xbox to Dolby 5.1 mode. It's a simple process: Just go into the Xbox Dashboard, find the Audio Preferences menu, and select Dolby Digital 5.1.

2 SUBWOOFER:
One of the most commonly asked questions regarding surround-sound setup: "Where the hell does my subwoofer go?" Start by placing the subwoofer on the floor, where you'll actually be sitting when you're playing. Next, start up a game (preferably one with a lot of bass) and walk around the room until you figure out where the low end sounds the best. Then look down—that's where the subwoofer should go.

3 FIND THE SWEET SPOT:
Set up your speakers so that the center of each speaker (the midpoint between the tweeter and woofer) is at ear level on a horizontal plane. Each speaker should also be equidistant from the sweet spot (ear level center point) along a circle. It's best not to place the speakers up near the ceiling and then angle them down.

RULE 1: Position the left and right speakers at either side of your television. About 25 degrees from center is an ideal position. Position them too far apart, however, and the sound field will collapse.

RULE 2: Place the center speaker on top of or directly below your TV set. This speaker locks sound to the screen and is often used for speech and first-person character sound effects.

RULE 3: Make sure that the left surround speaker is behind the TV seating area on the left side and that the right surround speaker is behind the TV seating area on the right side. Optimum position for each surround speaker is 90 to 110 degrees from its respective side of the seating area. //





Every bit as easy on the ass and eyes as it is on the ears, Dolby's private screening theater is nearly unparalleled when it comes to demonstrating the very pinnacle in sound and vision. Luxuriously appointed—and perfectly cozy—this audiophile's dream features sound-sensitive seats, noiseless air conditioning, and more geometry than most small-to-midsize cities.



Dolby Lab's game guys (and gal), from left to right: Matthew Tullis, game developer support engineer Jack Buser, game developer relations manager; and Lori Solomon, game publisher relations.

THE SURROUND OF MUSIC

DVD TOOK OVER AS THE HOME VIDEO STANDARD, CHANGING THE WAY THE HUMAN EAR EXPERIENCED CINEMA AT HOME.

» enormous step forward for immersive sound. Unlike surround systems past, with Dolby 5.1 all channels were active; differ-ent sounds and effects could be mapped to each individual speaker for true multidirectional sound. First used in movie theaters, Dolby 5.1 came into homes with the advent of the laser disc; once DVD took over as the home video standard, it changed the way the human ear experienced cinema at home.

Because the format was only applicable to passive, linear entertainment (movies), however, Dolby Digital 5.1 never brushed shoulders with the world of interactive entertainment. The concept was technological balderdash until, at some point during the development of the Xbox hardware, a programmer at Microsoft decided that 5.1 sound could, in fact, be decoded in real time. So Dolby and Microsoft put their collective craniums together and, to the astonishment of many skeptics, produced the first-ever Dolby 5.1-ready videogame console.

So what exactly did Microsoft do that everyone else didn't? "If you look at GameCube," Buser says, "it's actually got a really powerful audio chip in there, but they only give you analog stereo to get it out. So you can do as much processing in the console as you want to get the game to sound as good as possible, but if you don't give it the right pipe to get out, it's like trying to cram a whole pizza into your garbage disposal—it's just not gonna go through.

"What Sony forgot to do was put in a Dolby Digital encoder," Buser continues. "So they got the pipe, and then they didn't do the actual back-end that they needed. The PS2 is essentially the same sound as the PS1. The Xbox not only gave you the pipe to get the sound out, the optical output, but they gave you Dolby Digital and incredibly powerful tools for developers. The Xbox's horsepower enables it to render the audio, get it to Dolby Digital, and get it out to your home theater."

Of course, none of this historical context or evangelical banter means a thing until you sit down and actually hear the sound waves for yourself. Current users are the converted; for everyone else, yes, this involves buying new hardware (ranging from a couple hundred bucks for a solid all-in-one system, to several-thousand-dollar units that sound so sweet they turn earwax to honey). But the returns are absolutely invaluable, not far from the aural equivalent of videogames' graphical revolution from two dimensions to three. //



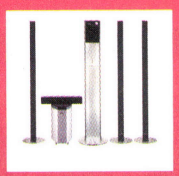


SOUND SPECTRUM

Surround yourself, fool—sound options from entry-level to exotic

5.1 systems come in all shapes, sizes, and prices. Component-based systems—consisting of a receiver, speakers, and a subwoofer, all sold individually—occupy the high end of the spectrum. For first-timers looking for some-thing a bit easier on the bank account, various manufacturers now sell fully integrated 5.1 systems. These all-in-one setups pack the speakers, subwoofer, and amplifier into a single package and boast extremely impressive aural fidelity for the money. Just be sure to get a system with optical input and Dolby Digital capabilities.

The most important thing is to get in the game—the difference between a $3,000 5.1 system and a low-end, all-in-one box, after all is nowhere near the difference evident when upgrading a standard stereo setup to a 5.1 Dolby Digital system. It's easy to put off, but once experienced, the returns are invaluable. [Note: You'll also need either the Xbox Advanced AV Pack or Xbox High Definition AV Pack, depending on whether you use component or S-Video input with your television.] //



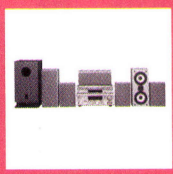
SAMSUNG HT-DS100 HOME THEATER SYSTEM

For those on a budget, the Samsung is about as entry-level as you should go for a Dolby Digital 5.1 system. You're not going to shake the earth with this one, but it's more than adequate for those just trying to get in the game (pardon the pun). With solid sound output and frequency response, find this one for under $200 and make your money go a long way...



KENWOOD HTB 307

With full support for Dolby Digital and Dolby Pro Logic II, this is one of the best systems available for under $300. Prices go even lower—Sony, Panasonic, and JVC all make solid entry-level systems for about a hundred bucks less—but in terms of bang for the buck, the Kenwood makes an excellent first system.



ONKYO HT-S777C

For something with a bit more punch, Onkyo offers an impressive all-in-one package...all high-quality components for $700. Includes a DVD/CD player with a carousel-style six-disc changer, which supports that one important format Xbox does not (MP3 CDs).



KENWOOD VRS-7100

For those who would rather take the component route, Kenwood's VRS-7100 provides a quality amplifier for under $400. It includes Dolby Digital, Dolby Pro Logic II, and the important Dolby Headphone, along with three optical inputs for various gaming and movie-watching rigs.



DENON AVR-3805

With a clean, dynamic sound and enough punch to impress any audiophile, Denon's 7.1 A/V receiver is a great choice for those looking for a high-end receiver without the high-end price. A thousand bucks might seem like a lot of money, of course, but it's a steal in the context of the rest of the high-end market.



YAMAHA RX-Z9

Yamaha's flagship model is impressive on all fronts: High-definition Cinema DSP technology, support for all Dolby formats, the ability to automatically optimize sound for the listening room, incredible audio fidelity, and an excellent interface. The $3,500 price tag, however, makes it strictly for the ballers.

EXPECT THE INCREDIBLE!



"SO EXCITING IT MAKES US JUMP OUT OF WINDOWS TRYING TO EKE OUT SOME LATENT SUPERPOWERS"
– PREVIEW, GMR JUNE 2004

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Cartoon Violence

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U.K.

EVO LIVE

The game isn't even coming to America yet (officially, at least), but over in Europe, *Pro Evolution Soccer 4* will pack Xbox Live support for the best in online soccer competition. Konami wanted to keep the news under wraps a bit longer, but some bright penny accidentally left an Xbox Live option in the public trial version at the Game Stars Live show in London. The game launches in PAL territories in November and may come Stateside early next year.

U.K.

IF YOU DON'T EAT YOUR MEAT...

Looking to net some better press after the *Manhunt* murder fiasco (which, if you lost track, turned out to have zip to do with *Manhunt* after all), the U.K. game industry announced a deal to fund a city school in London, England. The Entertainment Software Charity, founded and funded by major publishers and small developers alike, donated some 1.5 million pounds ($1.84 million) to help establish an academy in Paddington, and it's hoping to draw more over the coming year.

U.K.

EASY BREEZY

Swedish developer Starbreeze Studios naturally had its pick of projects and publishing offers after receiving massive critical praise for *The Chronicles of Riddick*. Now, the company says it's picked one...but nobody's saying any more than that at this point. Starbreeze has reportedly signed a letter of intent to do a new game for somebody, and that's all the news so far. Vivendi has openly said that it would like to see a *Riddick* sequel, but we'll see if Starbreeze is ready to sign on.

LONDON CALLING: XBOX IN THE U.K.



Andy Hartup
News Editor
XBM

No death, finger-pointing, and misery this month. No, no, no. This month has been extremely kind to the Xbox owner, and the feeling here is that the best is still to come. However, some people just can't help looking a little too far into the future, and because of this, the Internet has once again become a hive of hype, nonsense, and speculation. Perhaps this is what prompted Bungie to post a humorous article on the subject at Bungie.net.

The subject of debate has been the Xbox Next. Having contributed to it in last month's article, I got to wondering about why the industry has become so obsessed with the subject. However, after a brief chat with some top developers (including Mr. Pete Parsons, ladies and gentlemen), it became abundantly clear that most of these key players hadn't even thought about it. This was obvious not from the answers they gave—it was the wall of frowns that greeted me each time I posed the question, "What are your views on the Next Generation?" Admittedly, poor old Pete, along with one of the big fish in Rare's pond, had been grilled in a tiny cubicle at the Leipzig Games Conference for a good five hours before I popped the question, and perhaps the fact that my question didn't include the words "halo" or "two" stumped them for a second. It wasn't until I talked to Microsoft's U.K. PR representative that the truth came crashing down.

Having already heard the question, he knew exactly how to answer it. As I listened, it became abundantly clear that while developers love people to see and talk about their latest games, attention is constantly shifted to discussion about the Next Generation, the next big thing. The classic example of this concerns *Splinter Cell. Pandora Tomorrow* was still on the charts when everyone started going crazy about an Xbox version of *Chaos Theory*. It's because of this that games pick up the title of "unsung classic," because they're forgotten as players act like magpies around newer, shinier prospects.

So what is there to look forward to now? The end of 2004 will be a massive event for the Xbox, and I, for one, already have my *Halo 2* preorder firmly placed. But what's to come after *Halo 2*, *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory*, and all the other games we've been obsessed with for the past year or two? *Jade Empire* would be an obvious choice; *Doom 3* and *Conker* are other quality options, but the fact is, none of the 2005 titles have the star power that *Halo*, *Fable*, and *Splinter Cell* seem to carry. Perhaps in looking forward we should set our sights on the middle distance, the area between this year's festive bonanza and the next generation of Xbox. If we don't start to champion these fresh titles, then chances are, people will remember the Christmas of 2004 as the crest of the console wave. It's all downhill from there... //



INDIA

BOLLYBOX

It's probably going to wait until the next console generation, but Microsoft is eyeing India as one of the next big international markets for the Xbox. With the tech business booming there, the Indian market can afford more expensive gadgets, and Microsoft wants the Xbox successor to be one of them. In Asia, you can presently buy an Xbox in Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Singapore, while Microsoft would like to expand into India, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and especially the rest of China, where online gaming is looking to boom the way it did in Korea a few years back.

JAPAN

ARCADE ARASHI

The Xbox may be all but dead in Japan, but Microsoft keeps plugging away regardless. Its latest stunt is the appointment of '80s-vintage manga hero Game Center Arashi (star of a series in the *Coro Coro Comic* anthology, now home to Nintendo stars like Kirby) as the mascot for its Xbox Live Arcade campaign, the collective promotion of arcade-born games like *Metal Slug*, *Guilty Gear XX*, and *Shikigami no Shiro*. Given Microsoft's likely target market, though, maybe the upskirtastic Arcade Gamer Fubuki would have been a better choice.

JAPAN

ONCE BITTEN, NOT SHY

In between issuing new bonds to service old debt, Capcom's developing games for all three next-generation console platforms. It's not surprising, given that the house *Street Fighter* built was also a multiplatform player in this generation, but it may be reassuring given that Capcom's dropped most support for the current Xbox. Watch this space, though—a lot can happen in the two years between now and the real next-gen console wars.

TOKYO TRIBE: XBOX IN JAPAN

There is rarely a reason to party at the Xbox building in Daitabashi, Tokyo. But on September 23, there was finally a cause for celebration—at long last, *Phantom Dust* hit store shelves.

The guys on the seventh floor have created something really special with *Phantom Dust*. Review scores are in, and even the fickle editors at *Famitsu* are singing its praises to the score of 34 out of 40 (including one 10). With *Phantom Dust* still confined to Asia-only distribution, Americans are importing the game and Japanese Xboxes despite the $400 bill from Play-Asia.com. Finally, the Tokyo Xbox project has something to be proud of.

But first-day sales of *Phantom Dust* totaled a measly 2,000 copies—a hard reality to swallow no matter how much sake was consumed the night before. *Phantom Dust* will be lucky to ship 5,000 copies this year. That number translates into just 10 percent of the Xbox user base who are willing to spend their hard-earned yen on one of the year's best games out of Japan.

FAST FACT

35
GAMES

Number of new titles on display at Microsoft's Xbox booth at TGS 2004

Blame the bulky Xbox hardware, the uninspired marketing, and Blinx's ugly mug for the piecemeal Xbox market share in Japan, but don't just fault Microsoft for lukewarm receptions to games like *Ninja Gaiden* and *Phantom Dust*. Japan has long been viewed as a digital heaven for videogames, but where are these hardcore game fanatics? Wouldn't a hardcore gamer play any critically acclaimed title no matter what console it was on?

Take a peek at the buying habits of American hardcore gamers by logging on to eBay and typing in "*Panzer Dragoon Saga*" (which happens to be *Phantom Dust* director Yukio Futatsugi's previous work). Americans are shelling out up to $180 for used copies of the game and are most likely buying Sega Saturns to play it on. You would think there are more than 2,000 game fanatics in Japan that would buy an Xbox for modern classics like *Ninja Gaiden*, *Otogi 2*, and *Phantom Dust*.

Even Sony is having trouble selling new franchises. The PS2 version of *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* garnered nice reviews and was backed by an aggressive marketing campaign that even masked it as a Japanese-developed game, but it still flatlined at retail. There appears to be a larger problem at hand in Japan, and the tired explanation that the Japanese don't like Western games is wearing thin. //



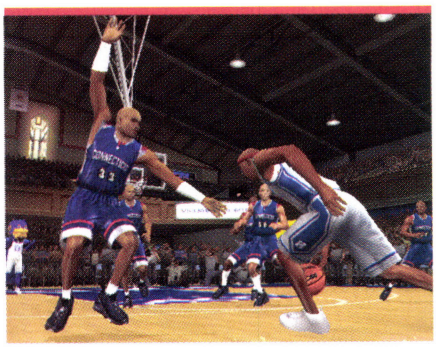
Ryan Payton
Writer
Tokyo, Japan

MEGA BITS

Coming soon to Xbox

Survival of the Fittest?

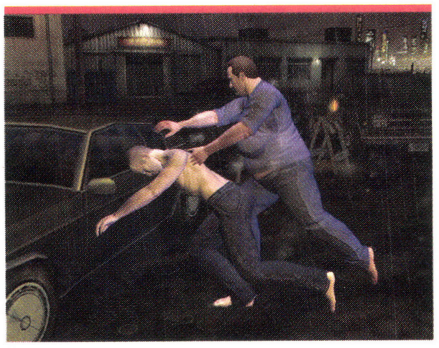
Hamburg-based development house Replay Studios has announced a free-roaming adventure that gives gamers the chance to outwit, outplay, and outlast some of the significant disasters of the last 100 years. Dubbed *Survivor*, the game will re-create such harrowing events as the sinking of the *Titantic*, Hurricane Andrew, and 9/11. Controversial? You bet.



ESPN COLLEGE HOOPS 2K5

College Hoops rebounds with a deeper legacy mode, giving players the option to live the life of a coach. But there's more to the game than helping your team win: Hire an assistant coach with too much ambition, and he might leave to go coach at another school. Gamers can also calls plays and then watch their ballers execute them. You've never experienced fast-paced coaching like this, baby! //

DATA
PUB: **Sega** DEV: **Visual Concepts** REL: **Available now**



FIGHT CLUB

If you ever wanted to see Meat Loaf's ample mammaries rendered in perfectly animating real-time 3D, this here's the game for you. If that's not quite your speed, Vivendi's *Fight Club* packs other assorted attractions—clinch attacks, grappling moves, and bone-breaking attacks that will put a career mode opponent out of commission, plus a slick interface inspired by David Fincher's sweeping camera moves. //

DATA
PUB: **VU Games** DEV: **Genuine Games** REL: **Available Now**



GREG HASTINGS' PAINTBALL

Greg Hastings is like the Perry Mason of violent stain-filled pellet-based shooting games. Or he would be, if paintball was played in a courtroom, and he was about 300 pounds heavier and utterly unbeatable thanks to the help of surprise witnesses. Anyway, Hastings wants to shoot you over Xbox Live in this, the most accurate—you can even attempt to cheat—paintball videogame to date. //

DATA
PUB: **Activision** DEV: **WXP** REL: **Available Now**



THE INCREDIBLES

As an Incredible, it's your job to look evil in its wicked, bloodshot eye and then punch it in its twisted, sneering mouth. To do the job, you'll get to access powers far beyond those of mortal men, including invisibility, stretchiness, speed, and brute strength. You'll also drive the Incredicar, which is like a car with 40 to 60 percent more incredibility, and learn the ropes from Samuel L. Jackson, who plays the chilly hero Frozone. //

DATA
PUB: **THQ** DEV: **Heavy Iron Studios** REL: **Available Now**



JADE EMPIRE

Yes, Virginia, there is life after November 9. Consider, for example, *Jade Empire*, which we recently had the chance to catch up with. Lush, lavish, and packed with visuals that push the Xbox hardware to the hilt, BioWare's latest adventure is shaping up to be something truly special. Look for more details about this ambitious epic—including info on characters such as ol' Sagacious Zu here—in next month's issue of *XBN*. //

DATA
PUB: **Microsoft** DEV: **BioWare** REL: **Q1 2005**



THE URBZ: SIMS IN THE CITY

EA's Sims have always favored a rather staid, suburban existence—the endless acquisition of widgets and creature comforts requires plenty of elbow room to expand. The new console variation on the theme makes style the object of desire, instead of simply more substance. Buying new stuff, surviving twitch minigame jobs, and making new scenes all serve the end of earning the hippest rep in town. //

DATA
PUB: **Electronic Arts** DEV: **Electronic Arts** REL: **November**

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RATING PENDING
RP
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.

Hot news flash!

Ubisoft has announced *Cold Fear*, a new "action-horror" game set aboard a mysterious Russian whaling ship and, later, an oil rig. "Intense combat," "a high element of the shockingly unexpected" and intelligent enemies, both human and otherwise, have been promised. The catch? It's only been announced for Asia, Europe, and the Middle East—for now.



Hit me, baby, one more time

The hits just keep on coming for Agent 47, Eidos' chrome-domed contract killer and star of *Hitman: Blood Money*, recently announced for a spring 2005 release. *Money* finds the hunter being hunted, as members of 47's agency are being swatted like flies. Cash rules everything around him this time, apparently—so get out there and start earning!



AMERICAN MCGEE PRESENTS SCRAPLAND

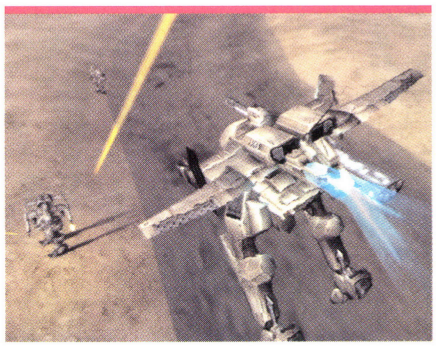
Ever since the *GTA* series exploded, it was inevitable that the clones would soon follow. The big question with any of these is whether they do enough to differentiate themselves from the godfather while still delivering an entertaining experience. *Scrapland* attempts to achieve this by ditching the whole idea of accurately modeled cities and realism in favor of a gritty, futuristic sci-fi setting filled with robots and occasional humor.

You, as robot journalist D-Tritus, have free reign of the Scrapland world. The main story has you gathering clues as you try to figure out such mysteries as who's behind a high-profile homicide, and your methods aren't always by the book—in one case, you try to blackmail the chief of police, only to get clobbered by the behemoth of a bot. In true *GTA* fashion, you also have side quests to keep you occupied. A particular seedy bot sends you on a number of shady missions that include taking out some civilians or simply winning races.

When not pursuing the truth, you can cruise in your modifiable ship, flying to the different districts of the city, free to take out other vehicles if you feel like avoiding cops. And if you're running low on dough, you can jack a ride and bring it to the junkyard or challenge another robot to combat or a race.

Some of the game's other interesting features include a branching conversation system and D-Tritus' ability to transform into other characters. Need to get into a restricted area? Change into a cop bot and go about your business. Need to break out of jail? Assume the form of a robot the size of a rabbit and escape through the air ducts. Whether all the pieces come together remains to be seen, but there are certainly some good ideas here. It's definitely one sci-fi fans will want to keep tabs on. //

DATA
PUB: **Enlight Soft** DEV: **Mercury Stream** REL: **Available Now**



GUNGRIFFON: ALLIED ASSAULT

By now, we can all probably agree that the future of robotics does not bode well for the state of world peace. On Xbox alone, giant robots take to the streets in both fast-paced arcade (*MechAssault*) and complex cockpit simulator (*Steel Battalion*) action. From somewhere in between the two extremes comes *GunGriffon: Allied Assault*, a third- and first-person hybrid shooter set in the near future.

The series first made its mark on American gamers as a mech action affair on Sega's 32-bit Saturn system back in the mid-'90s. Although the game never took off here commercially, fans were blown away by its attention to pseudorealism and detail. Those who gave the game a chance witnessed the future world as envisioned by GameArts: bleak, war-torn, economically dire, and believable. But simply beyond a compelling backdrop, *GunGriffon*'s handling of the game's main star—namely, its bipedal mechs that lack the nonsense superhero designs of childhood cartoons such as *Voltron* or even *Robotech*—made it resonate with gamers. These were basically tanks with legs and a shipload of guns.

After a somewhat muted appearance on PlayStation 2, *GunGriffon* is back on Xbox with minor changes to its robotic formula. Most obvious is the inclusion of a third-person perspective, making *GunGriffon* a comparable romp to games like *MechAssault*. New to the series is the obligatory Xbox Live functionality that lets a handful (the number is still to be decided) of players do deathmatch, team, and co-op battles. Although this may pale in comparison to the assortment of online modes available in *MechAssault 2*, those in the know will play *GunGriffon* for an entirely different giant robot experience.

Tecmo (of the bouncing breasts and sweet ninjas) will publish *GunGriffon* in the States. //

DATA
PUB: **Tecmo** DEV: **Microsoft** REL: **December**



ODDWORLD STRANGER

A lot of people laughed when Oddworld Inhabitants announced a new first-person shooter. A lot of people are about to eat some crow, too, or the equivalent in the rich Oddworld-ian bestiary. The last developer anyone expected just might blow the genre wide open next year.

Though it shares the same rich world and beautiful art direction, *Stranger*'s story has no direct link to the other *Oddworld* games. "Same planet, different country," is how creator Lorne Lanning sums it up. It doesn't play like its predecessors, either—it's a blend of FPS combat and quirky third-person action. Even without his trusty crossbow in third-person view, the Stranger can throw down with his massive fists or drop to all fours and run 55 miles an hour.

First person, though, is where the game gets genuinely innovative. The hook is what Lanning calls "live ammo." When he's hunting bounties, the Stranger's crossbow doesn't fire bullets or quarrels. It launches nine different Oddworld critters, each with basic and upgraded fire effects. Combinations of ammo (you can equip two at once) mix with complex enemy A.I. to create different ways of bringing home the bacon.

Loud-mouthed rodents lure enemies into deathtraps. Foul-smelling skunks or web-spinning spiders incapacitate them. There's always the direct approach—stinging wasps, explosive homing bats, or wide-angle riot slugs (seriously!)—but a breathing bounty pays better than a dead one. The default weapon, a charge-up firefly stun shot, lets the Stranger hunt for ammo in environments inhabited by many useful species.

Catching bounties is only part of the game. To spoil the plot would be criminal, but we'll at least say that the Stranger finds a more meaningful goal than "wanted: dead or alive." He might find a whole new reason for being, and his creators look like they might as well. //

DATA
PUB: **EA** DEV: **Oddworld Inhabitants** REL: **Spring**



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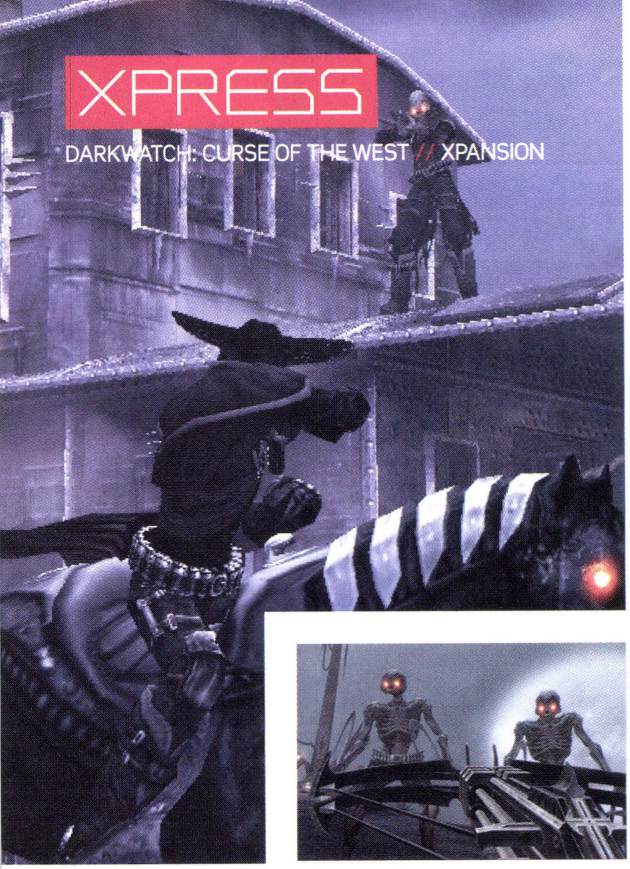
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DARKWATCH

Of cowboys and crucifixes

Sammy Studios rode into town bearing playable code of *Darkwatch: Curse of the West* (think *Painkiller* with more panache), and *XBN* answered the call. In this, Sammy Studios' first flagship title, players step into the weathered boots of one Jericho Cross—a gunslinging half-vampire from the Judge Dredd school of hardcase antiheroes.

As Jericho, we rode alongside then boarded an armored train, exorcising gun-toting zombies all the way. We mounted stationary guns, unleashed melee attacks (one for each gun—including sniper rifles), and watched as downed horses and riders tumbled in the dust, courtesy of the Havok physics engine.

If anything, the *Darkwatch* team—clearly drawing a lot of inspiration from the world of comic books—has its art direction well in hand. This West is already wild, weird, and wonderfully detailed, with crooked crosses, moonlit canyons, and gnarly trees. Enemies are suitably gruesome (the oozer especially seems sprung from the mind of author Clive Barker), and each of Jericho's guns has been stylized to reflect the game's gritty gunmetal aesthetic.

But there's more to this tale than guns 'n' ammo. Sammy promises a suitably sophisticated story to go with the already adult content shown so far (which includes Jericho's tryst with the raven-haired Playmate Tala). Not totally immoral, Jericho will be forced to make judgement calls (will you extract the poison from an infected bystander or simply take a bite out of her?) that, naturally, affect the game's outcome. //

More info at: **www.sammystudios.com**



XPANSION: GET MORE FROM YOUR XBOX

Three years after its release, the Xbox console remains the favorite target of industrious hardware hackers. Even considering the unauthorized devices that cracked Nintendo's and Sony's platforms wide open, Xbox remains history's most thoroughly modified, exploited, and customized game machine.

In the past, Xpansion hasn't covered potentially illegal Xbox mod chips, but hackers have just found a way around the "potentially illegal" part, too. And Microsoft's probably having stomachaches as a result.

After developing an innovative but legally questionable Xbox mod chip called Matrix and a follow-up called the Chameleon, the hardware-savvy group of hackers known as Team Xodus went to work on a new chip called Xenium. Matrix and Chameleon walked the fine line of legality—they were capable of cracking Xbox's security features and enabling the console to perform all sorts of feats, but Xodus shipped the chips without the necessary—and potentially illegal—software to do anything. Purchasers had to find that software themselves and install it at their own risk.

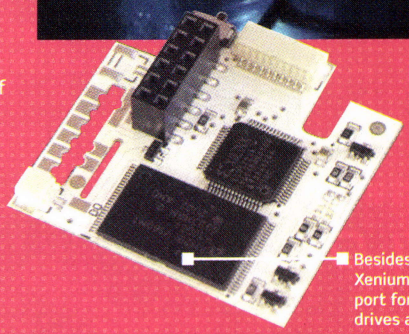
Xenium solves that problem. Not only is the solder-free chip easy to physically install inside an Xbox, but it also includes its own apparently legal software full of cool features. Called "XeniumOS 2.0," the software can do parlor tricks such as flipping your Xbox from NTSC to PAL video output and changing its DVD region code so you can watch imported movies. These sorts of features—combined with the chip's ability to let Xbox users utilize the hacker-developed Xbox Media Center, covered in an earlier Xpansion—earned Xenium a positive mention last month on the cover of a British home-theater magazine.

But Xenium's appeal to techies goes deeper. Team Xodus also included complete FTP and Web server functionality in XeniumOS, plus Samba networking for file-sharing purposes. This means that once Xenium is inside your Xbox, you can use it to host your own website or collection of downloadable files. And you don't need another piece of software to do it.

Until now, it was fair to assume that a mod chip's maker or purchaser had questionable intentions. With Xenium's useful and feature-rich OS software, Team Xodus is taking the first steps toward changing that perception. We're betting it won't be the last to try. //

Jeremy Horwitz





Xodus has made Xenium compatible with a cool set of Xbox LED case lights.

Besides the mod chip (shown), Xenium includes its own USB port for use with USB pen drives and other media.

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LIVE

WHERE XBOX LIVE CALLS HOME DECEMBER 2004



STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT AN ARMY OF OBI-WAN

As *Battlefront* knocks *Rainbow Six* off the top of the Live heap, *XBN* goes deeper with a chat, some tips, and something about Ewoks







Conquering the Live world one planet at a time, this is the title *Star Wars* fans have been waiting their whole lives for. Everyone's wanted to defend those generators on Hoth, roll into combat as one of those sweet droidekas, or blast those %@#&! Ewoks in the back of their fuzzy melon heads—and now you get to do it with your friends. Right out of the box, *Battlefront* stole first place on the official top-25 Live game list from the reigning champ, *Rainbow Six 3: Black Arrow*. Although *Battlefront* clearly stands on its own, it doesn't hurt that the official *Black Arrow* online forums have been abuzz with players who are frustrated by the wait for a patch that fixes the known bugs in multiplayer. With more than a month of waiting under their belts and no ETA in sight, it was more than some could stomach.

With a massive marketing blitz that coincided with the release of the *Star Wars* trilogy on DVD, *Battlefront* stormed onto the field (literally), and suddenly "Ding" Chavez was last week's news. Gamers hung up their MP5s in trade for the jaun-tier Imperial blasters and Wookiee bowcasters, ready to take on a new challenge. When *Battlefront* suffered from some connectivity issues right at launch, the announcement and following patch to fix it came within the first week—and it worked. That's the kind of response that raises eyebrows—and massive numbers of players.

PANDEMIC TALKS TWEAKING

We talk three-breasted dancing girls. Er...

It was tough peeling these folks off their unyielding efforts to improve the game, but through hard work and promises of multi-breasted, green dancing girls, we got Dan Pettit, *Battlefront*'s producer, to relent. Heaven help us when they realize where we got the dancing girls from.

Which side is most popular among LucasArts folks?
Truly, all four factions are liked by people here in the office. It depends on whom you identify with. CIS have a unique feel to them because they're not nonhuman. Both the droideka and the super battle droid are unique classes. The Republic, although all clones, have a big following; personally, there's nothing like flying around with the jet trooper! Obviously, the Empire is just pure evil and they get to kill Ewoks...and we have a few people who relate well to that. Finally, how can you not like the Rebels?

What was the most difficult thing to implement in the game?
The most difficult part of the project was getting the game balanced between all the classes along with all the vehicles and then tweaking that balance specifically for each platform. That process was a constant iteration that went on for months.

What part of developing *Battlefront* was the most fun?
Being able to shoot my coworkers on a daily basis was thoroughly enjoyable.

Now that you have knocked the No. 1 online game, *Black Arrow*, off its perch, what are you going to do to stay No. 1?
The team is very committed to the long-term success of *Star Wars Battlefront*. We have a dedicated team whose focus is to monitor what people are saying about the game and make improvements based on player feedback as well as add features. //
Matt Holmes

Switching sides

You can trust a guy named Cowofevil, can't you? One of the top *Black Arrow* players from last issue's Live strategies column weighs in with his views of *Battlefront*'s appeal.

What brought you to *Battlefront*?
An ad in a gaming magazine, as well as all the hype built up for it by the release of the *Star Wars* trilogy on DVD.

What's most appealing to you about *Battlefront*?
The grand scope of *Star Wars Battlefront* is definitely where the appeal lies—the idea of being able to play an interactive battleground and live out a war. You can do anything, be it piloting an AT-AT, flying an X-wing, or simply running around as a grunt. Truly that is what gaming is all about.

What would help keep it your No. 1 online game?
I think it will be around for quite some time and remain No. 1 at least until *Halo 2* hits shelves. They'll need to patch it and make new battle-fields if they want to keep it interesting. Other battlefield-type games, like the *Modern Combat* one coming out, will also certainly overtake it once its appeal wears off. Basically, it got the honor of being the first battleground-type game on a console, but there will be better ones.

How do you feel about *Battlefront* replacing *Black Arrow* as No. 1 online game?
I'm happy for George Lucas. I'm sure he needs the money.

SAGE ADVICE FROM THE JEDI COUNCIL

Ten top tips from the Battlefront team

Some people use the Force, and other people are the Force. As members of the former, *Xbox Nation* consulted with the latter and got tips right from the source. The *Star Wars Battlefront* team wants you to win, so listen up!

1. The rocket launcher class has proximity mines as a secondary weapon. These are great for taking out infantry. Place them on walls, around corners, and on command posts. Your enemies will usually be in such a rush that they won't even notice the little black disk on the ground right in front of them!

2. Keep moving all the time. Standing still makes you an easy target for snipers.

3. Concussion grenades are not effective against infantry, but they will stick to vehicles and turrets and do a lot of damage.

4. Deny your enemy the use of vehicles by stealing them, destroying them, or capturing the command post where they spawn. Doing this will almost guarantee a victory.

5. Use commands to communicate with A.I. troops; their assistance can be vital to winning a map.

6. The rocks on Geonosis provide good cover for snipers and antivehicle units trying to take down infantry and vehicles. Each map has similar environmental advantages, so spend time exploring the maps and finding the key spots that provide tactical advantages.

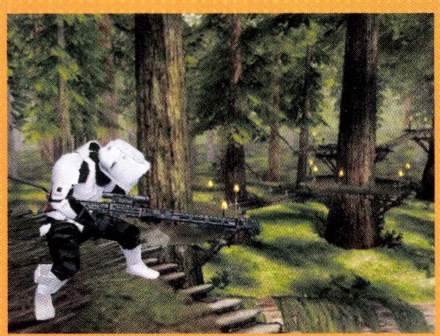
7. Protect vehicles—they are valuable and can turn the tide of any battle.

8. Reload often—you don't want to be caught in a firefight off guard.

9. The Imperial pilot class is very powerful. But it will take some practice to use. The pilot's mortar launcher will kill an enemy unit in a single shot if you hit it directly. Plus, he can dispense health and ammo to himself and his allies.

10. The Rebel Wookiee can take out a turret with a single time bomb. This can be very helpful when staging an assault on an enemy command post. //







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Ultimate also means online. Log onto Xbox Live and you'll be able to setup play sessions involving a max of eight players (not just two like other fighting games), and choose from six different play modes, including one-on-one, tag team, four-player team battle, battle royal, loser stays, and elimination tournament.

For the first time ever, two great fighters are being mixed together into a single "ultimate" package.

break out TRICKS

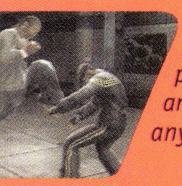
DEF JAM FIGHT FOR NY



ps2 / xbx / gcn

- ***It's All About Momentum!***

When your momentum meter is full, you can execute your big Blazin' move (your finishing move). In order to Blaze, simply push the right analog stick in any direction, then grapple your opponent and hit the right analog stick again. You have 30 seconds from when you first hit the right analog stick to use the Blazin' move. Try pointing the analog stick in different directions to discover each character's own Blazin' moves!



sweet TIPS

STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT



ps2 / xbx

- ***Man The Battlestations!***

Designed for space combat, the weapons installed on starfighters are often the most powerful on the battlefield. Establish air superiority, then conduct strafing runs to eliminate enemy vehicles and troops. When necessary, land near repair droids to stock up on more missiles.



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BREAK OUT OF THE ORDINARY



BURNOUT 3: TAKEDOWN

The art of driving offensively, revealed

There isn't a soul alive who walks away from *Burnout 3* without that thousand-yard stare—you know, the intense gaze one needs to dodge that 1-centimeter pixel that transforms into a bus-sized disaster in under two seconds. The joy of going past (or through) your opponents at warp factor 12 is second only to the joy of shouting, "SO LONG, SUCKER! A-HA-HA-HAAA!" into the headset. Avoid being the poor sucker on the other end with sage advice from these ace drivers online.

DRIVING SKILLS

"Learn the tracks. It has only been after playing the single-player and online versions for well over 60 hours that I am really learning all of the tracks. If you know the track, you'll know where the few shortcuts and diversions are. Knowing these helps you know when to smash your opponent into a wall or pillar under the train tracks." —**Oblioing**

"Boost is great, but it can be overdone. I beat higher-ranked players while I was in an Eliminator Super on a three-lap mountain view track (30-plus miles) using a minimal amount of boost. Depending on your car, using boost all the time can be too much to handle. Get the feel for your car before hitting the boost button and save it for long, clear straight shots or when a red team member is riding your tail." —**Vette95**

"Nip and tuck is a maneuver I often use for takedowns. Tap your opponent's rear bumper and try to get him to swerve a little. Boost into the inside of his swerve so that you can push him out into a wall or traffic. If this is done right, it will cause him to spin out right into a guardrail or oncoming traffic." —**Oblioing**

ROAD RAGE

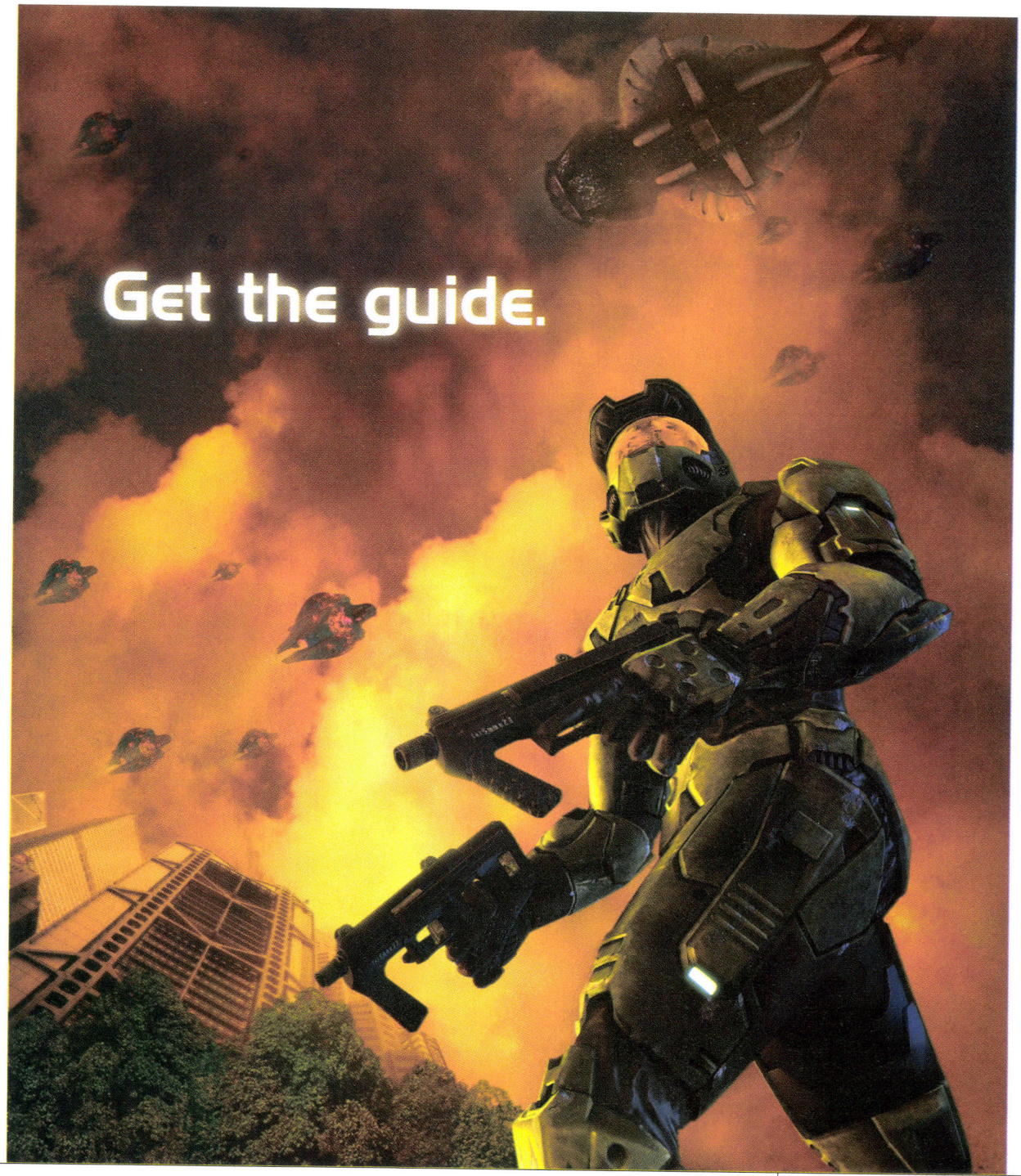
"If you are on the blue team and get taken out, the best way to complete the race is to defend your team so that they can finish. When you're taken out on the blue team, you score the invincibility mode for your car against nonplayer traffic, so immediately focus on taking out red team members and scoring takedowns. Be careful, though, obstacles like the pilings for elevated trains and highways are still speed killers!" —**Vette95**

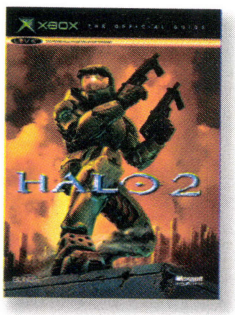
"I've got one word for playing road rage: boost. And boost like crazy. If you're on the blue team, get off the starting line as fast as you can, and as you go, try to take down the red team's cars instead of trying to outrun or dodge them, so you'll get boost multipliers. If you play offensively enough, you may even take the other team by surprise." —**Mr. Biscuits**

PARTY CRASH

"Watch as much of the lead playback as possible to get tips on how winners handle their vehicle selection. Sometimes, the ramp is not the best choice, especially if you are in a fire truck. Sometimes, size and mass are overrated. I used to think that the fire truck was always the best choice because it has weight you can throw around by using the A button to direct your crash, but I have been outcrashed by guys in the pickup truck." —**Vette95**

"I usually pick the flat-nosed semitruck or the pickup truck because they both have good speed and weight, which allows you to do more damage for better crash points. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't experiment. When using faster cars on small tracks with ramps, I'll usually slow down before the ramp, lest I fly right over the traffic." —**Mr. Biscuits**





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XBOX

Microsoft game studios

PRIMA GAMES

BUNGIE

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ON THE DL

The newest Xbox Live downloadable content, served fresh



FULL SPECTRUM WARRIOR

DOWNLOAD: A new campaign level called Epilogue 1.

WHY IT'S COOL: Just when you thought the single-player campaign was over, one of Al Afad's sons makes a comeback in the city of Al Saif by taking over the local radio tower and inciting local insurgents and militia to take back the streets, Zekestani style. This mission begins by having you take your teams through the town to clear a path for U.N. aid. This won't be easy, since this level (and its soon-to-follow sequel Epilogue 2) will be populated by dozens of enemies, who have apparently mastered the art of the ambush. Expect to see lots of snipers on rooftops and balconies. Find Al Afad Jr. and take his show off the air—permanently.



RALLISPORT CHALLENGE 2

DOWNLOAD: New Cars: The Volvo Amazon, Saab 96, BMW X5, and the VW Touareg.

New Career Modes: Mountain challenge (hill climbs) and arena challenge (ice racing and rallycross).

New Skins: Each of the 43 original cars in the game has new skins available. Not to be left out, each of the four new cars comes with six new skins.

New Mode: Challenges mode features daily, weekly, and monthly contests that feature a specific car and track, with the results published for the world to see on Xbox Live scoreboards.

WHY IT'S COOL: In two neat downloadable packages, you get more...of everything, making *RalliSport Challenge 2* the reigning king of dirt racing on four wheels.



NINJA GAIDEN

DOWNLOAD: *Ninja Gaiden Hurricane Pack Vol. 2.*

WHY IT'S COOL: Because Team Ninja heard some masked assassins had it a little too easy with the last *Hurricane Pack*, it upped the ante by kicking the difficulty level through the roof and throwing every enemy (including a series of bosses) in the book at Ryu. The upside is that he'll begin the self-contained scenario with some serious armament, including the True Dragon Sword, the Dabilahro, and the Vigoorian Flail. Because ninjas always flip out and kill people in style, Ryu will also have costumes from the first *Hurricane Pack*.



RAINBOW SIX 3: BLACK ARROW

DOWNLOAD: A new multiplayer map called The Village.

WHY IT'S COOL: Totally unrelated to the M. Night Shyamalan movie of the same name, this map has twin open-air marketplaces with sniper nests and darkened passages flowing throughout the surrounding buildings. More important, it doesn't suck like the movie. And since it's painted in a gritty Eastern European urban theme, you'll get that lovely "guerrilla warfare in Grozny" feeling while you smoke your opponents in the game's various multiplayer modes (adversarial, plant the bomb, and conquest). This map is ideal for eight-player games.



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TEEN
T
Mild Language
Mild Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

GOING LIVE LIST

Everything you wanted to know about Xbox Live (but were afraid to ask)

CURRENT XBOX LIVE GAMES

Title	Publisher	Live Multiplayer	Splitscreen Live	Downloadable Content/Updates
All-Star Baseball 2004	Acclaim			
All-Star Baseball 2005	Acclaim	X		Roster/stadium planned
Amped 2	Microsoft	X		Three slopes: Sky, Pioneer, and Slopestyle 2003
Armada 2: Star Command	Metro3D			
Armed and Dangerous	LucasArts			Summer Home mission
Brute Force	Microsoft			Three deathmatch maps: Prisoners Lament, Cerulean, Lockjaw
Burnout 2: Point of Impact DC	Acclaim			
Burnout 3: Takedown	EA	X		
Cabela's Dangerous Hunts	Activision			
Capcom vs. SNK 2: EO	Capcom	X		
Conflict: Desert Storm II—Back to Baghdad	Pivotal			Four uniforms: CT, Brit DPM, Woodland, Iraqi Republican
Chronicles of Riddick: EFBB	VU Games			
Dance Dance Revolution Ultramix	Konami			Three song packs
Dead Man's Hand	Atari	X		
DRIV3R	Atari			Share replays online
ESPN College Hoops	ESPN	X		Roster updates
ESPN Major League Baseball	ESPN	X		Roster updates
ESPN NBA Basketball	ESPN	X		Roster updates
ESPN NFL Football	ESPN	X		Roster updates
ESPN NHL Hockey	ESPN	X		Roster updates
ESPN NHL 2K5	ESPN	X		Roster updates
Full Spectrum Warrior	THQ	X		
Godzilla: Destroy All Monsters Melee	Atari			
Guilty Gear X2 #Reload	Majesco	X		
High Heat Major League Baseball 2004	3DO			Roster updates as of May 2003
Hunter: The Reckoning—Redeemer	Vivendi			Two sets of costumes
Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders	Microsoft	X		
Links 2004	Microsoft	X		Three courses: Ocean Mill DC, The Gallery North, Kapalua Plantation
MLB Inside Pitch 2003	Microsoft	X		Roster updates
Madden NFL 2005	EA Sports	X		
Magic: The Gathering—Battlegrounds	Atari	X		Ten new spells and one new arena
Men of Valor	Vivendi	X		
Metal Slug 3	SNK NeoGeo			
Midnight Club II	Rockstar	X		
Midway Arcade Treasures	Midway	X		
MotoGP	THQ	X	X	
MotoGP 2	THQ	X	X	
MTX: Mototrax	Activision	X		New tracks available
MX Superfly	THQ			Two new tracks (Backyard Bash and Mall Jump) and nine new riders
NASCAR 2005: Chase for the Cup	EA Sports	X		
NBA Inside Drive 2004	Microsoft	X		Spring roster update now available
NCAA College Basketball 2K3	Sega	X		
NCAA Football 2005	EA Sports	X		
NFL Fever 2004	Microsoft	X		Roster updates
NHL Rivals 2004	Microsoft	X		Roster updates as of March 2004
Ninja Gaiden	Team Ninja			Content pack: new weapons, enemies, A.I., camera views, and faster gameplay
Outlaw Volleyball	Simon & Schuster	X		
Phantasy Star Online Episodes I & II	Sega	X		New quests released periodically


OK
TO PLAY?
CHECK THE RATINGS ON EVERY VIDEO GAME BOX
ON FRONT
EARLY CHILDHOOD
EC
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
EVERYONE
E
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
ADULTS ONLY 18+
AO
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
VIDEO GAME
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EVERYONE
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Comic Mischief
Mild Lyrics
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LIVE

DOWNLOAD MANIA

So you've got a shiny new Xbox Live account and a fat stack of games gathered into small (but organized!) piles on your floor, but you don't know where to start. Well, here's our guide to everything Xbox Live: the games you can play online now, the games that have downloadable content, and the games with online capabilities that you should be looking out for in the near future. We've also got a list of the most popular games out there as of right now, so you know where to go for the stiffest competition around.

CURRENT XBOX LIVE GAMES

Title	Publisher	Live Multiplayer	Splitscreen Live	Downloadable Content/Updates
Power Drome	Mud Duck Prod.	X		
Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time	Ubisoft			
RalliSport Challenge 2	Microsoft	X		
Return to Castle Wolfenstein: Tides of War	Activision	X		Three missions: Barn, Safe, Chateau
Run Like Hell	Interplay			New levels and monsters
Sega GT Online	Sega	X		Five new tracks and monthly "key" competitions available
Sega Sports NBA 2K3	Sega	X		
Sega Sports NFL 2K3	Sega	X		
Sega Sports NHL 2K3	Sega	X		
Soldier of Fortune 2: Double Helix	Activision	X		Five maps: Kowloon Market, Oil Rig, Kremenchug, Ruins, and Cheapshot Forest
Star Wars Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy	LucasArts	X		
Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic	LucasArts			Yavin station location available for download
Star Wars: The Clone Wars	LucasArts	X		Two maps: Rhen Var and Kashyyyk
Steel Battalion: Line of Contact	Capcom	X		
Street Racing Syndicate	Namco	X		
SWAT: Global Strike Team	Vivendi			Two maps: Militant Hideout and One-Stop Shopping
Tenchu: Return From Darkness	Activision	X		
Tetris Worlds Online	THQ	X	X	
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005	EA	X		
ToeJam & Earl 3: Mission to Earth	Sega			Three characters (Suteki, Earl Bot, Nerdy ToeJam), two levels (Funkadelic, Hades)
Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon	Ubisoft	X		
Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3	Ubisoft	X		Five maps: Meat Factory, Scharins, Close Quarters, Parkade, Train Yards
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell	Ubisoft	X		Three missions: Kola Cell, Vselka Infiltration, and Vselka
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow	Ubisoft	X		Two maps: Federal Bank and River Mall
Top Spin	Microsoft	X		
Unreal Championship	Atari	X	X	Four deathmatch levels
Unreal II: The Awakening	Atari	X		
Vietcong: Purple Haze	Take-Two	X		
World Championship Pool 2004	Jaleco	X		
Worms 3D	Team17	X		
XIII	Ubisoft	X		

OUR PICKS: THE TOP XBOX LIVE GAMES

Crimson Skies: High Road to Revenge
Microsoft Game Studios | Microsoft
Three new maps (Caverns, Badlands, Lost Plateau), four new planes (Fury, Vampire, Hellhound, Firebrand), and two new game types (Gunheist, Chicken Pox)

Project Gotham Racing 2
Bizarre Creations | Microsoft
Paris premium pack contains seven tracks and eight cars (TVR Cerbera Speed 12, BMW M3 CSL, BMW 645Ci, Chevrolet Corvette C6, Ferrari 250 TR, Ferrari 288 GTO, Ferrari 365 GTS 4, Porsche 356A Carrera); Long Beach pack contains eight more tracks and cars (Ariel Atom 2, Ferrari 612 Scaglietti, Porsche 911 GT2 Clubsport, Subaru Impreza 22B STi, Radical SR3, Dodge Ram SRT-10, Volkswagen Nardo)

MechAssault
Day 1 Studios | Microsoft
Four mechs (Corvus, Raven, Loki, Hellbringer), seven maps (Hell's Kitchen, Midtown, Desert Storm, Stone Cold, Demolition Town, Rock Solid, Jotunheim, Secret Outpost, Magma Fields, City Under Siege), and five new game modes (giant killers, scout match, skirmish, check it, take it)

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Island Thunder
Red Storm | Ubisoft
Nine maps (Refinery, Beach, Ghost Town, Train Depot, Aurora, Riverbed, Roadblock, Tank, Ruins, Wilderness, Hunting Lodge, Island, Prison, Island Village) and three new game modes (firefight, defend, recon)

Secret Weapons Over Normandy
Totally Games | LucasArts
Three planes (Ki-61 Hien, He162 Volksjager, Macchi 202), three maps with missions for them (Last Chance, Furious Engel, Escape from Tripoli), and camo skin for planes, including the Ju-87 Stuka and the Betty

Midtown Madness 3
Digital Illusions | Microsoft
Fourteen cars (Ambassador, R4000, Shopper, Trasher, Carica, Furious, LastKraftWagen, Concept, Rusty, Formula Midtown, Campione, Stocker, Python, Burken) and 40 new checkpoint tracks

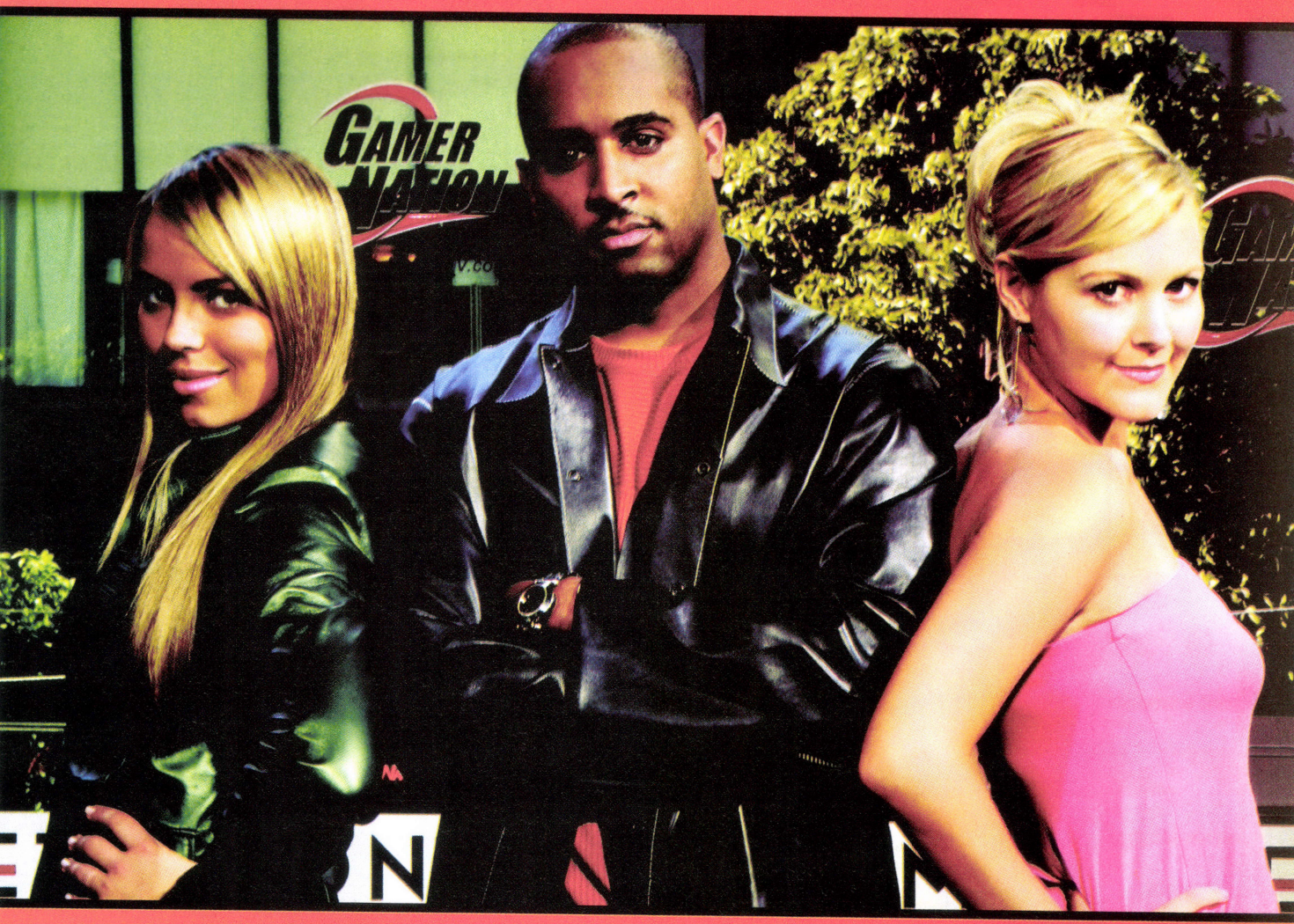
Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3
Ubisoft Montreal | Ubisoft
Five maps: Meat Factory, Scharins, Close Quarters, Parkade, and Train Yards

Counter-Strike
Valve | Microsoft
Two maps: Office and Inferno

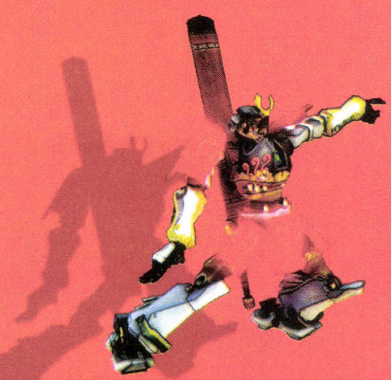
Star Wars Battlefront
Pandemic Studios | LucasArts

ESPN NFL 2K5
ESPN | Sega
Roster updates

GAMER NATION

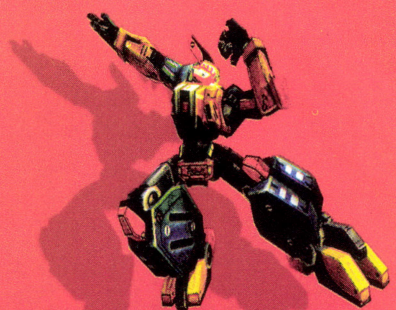


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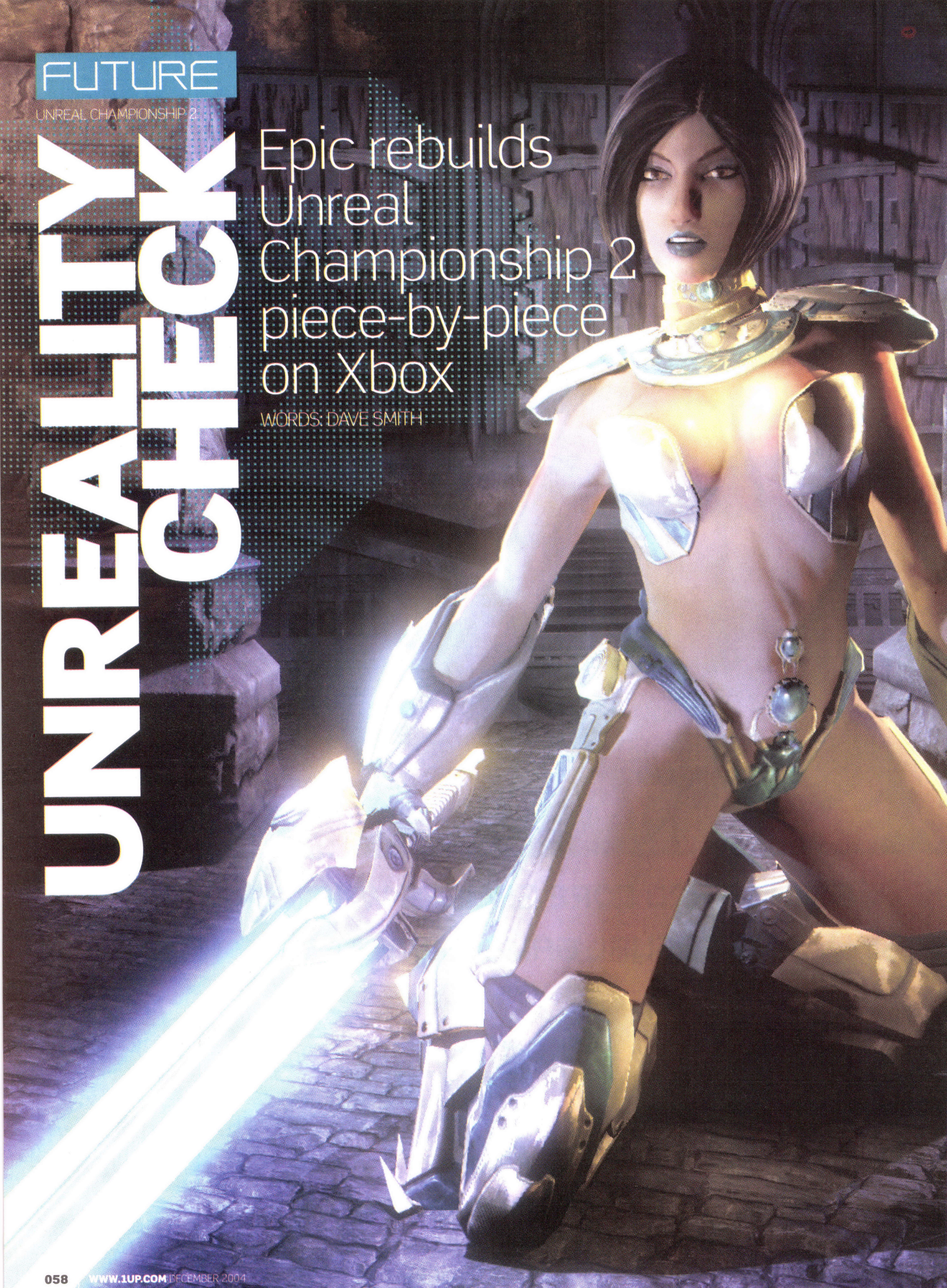


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UNREALITY CHECK

Epic rebuilds Unreal Championship 2 piece-by-piece on Xbox

WORDS: DAVE SMITH







UNREAL GENIUS

Producer Michael Capps has followed an unusual career path. A few years ago, he was an assistant professor at the Naval Postgraduate School, teaching courses in graphics and Java programming while researching virtual-reality training tools for the military.

As a natural extension of his coursework, Capps' next project led him to the PC FPS-cum-military recruiting tool *America's Army*. Designing the Army's *Unreal*-engine shooter put him in touch with the people at Epic Games, who tapped him to lead Scion Studios and the development of *Unreal Championship 2*.

So what's the moral of his story? Stay cool—go to school.









On November 9, anyone making an Xbox shooter will wake up in a whole new world. Bungie and Microsoft expect to dominate the genre with *Halo 2*, leaving the developers of anything similar in a difficult situation.

Surprisingly, nobody at Epic Games seems all that worried about the prospect of life after *Halo*. Michael Capps, Epic's new president and head of the *Unreal Championship 2* development team, points out that before Midway picked up their arena-based deathmatch shooter, Microsoft was ready to publish the game right alongside Bungie's. Why? Because once you get acquainted with *Championship 2*, it's plain to see it isn't just another *Quake III: Arena*.

Even Epic would admit that "*Quake* clone" pretty much sums up the first *Unreal Championship*, which was featured on the cover of *Xbox Nation* #4. The game bolted out of the gate plagued with technical issues; in other words, the previous *Championship* was the kind of game *Halo 2* would eat alive.

RECONSTRUCTION

To create something new with the sequel, Epic went back to the drawing board, building from the ground up one of the best-looking graphics engines on Xbox, and subsequently, a completely new game arose from the ashes.

Capps sums up the evolution of *Championship 2* as an ongoing effort to make a game specifically for console players. "What do I do with my Xbox?" he asks. "I play *Halo* co-op in my living room, I play fighting games in my living room...[the first] *Unreal Championship* wasn't really meant for that kind of play." Indeed, it's hard to shake the feeling that the previous *Championship* is nothing more than a sloppy PC port.

Taking influences from console fighters and action games, Epic's designers approached *Championship 2* differently. By radically challenging genre mainstays, such as by adding characters with strengths and weaknesses, Capps' team discovered that the game's design took on a life of its own.

For instance, the decision to develop complex melee combat snowballed into creating something much larger than just a string of combos. Initially meant to be a small part of the game, hand-to-hand combat is one of the key innovations in *Championship 2*. As in any good fighting game, melee encompasses two key areas: offense and defense.

"Just throwing in a sword was no good," Capps says, "because people just shoot you with rockets." To remedy such imbalances, the team has given melee fighters the ability to deflect projectiles back at their throwers. Just like in a fighting game, timing for this active defense is crucial. And although closing the gap with nothing but your energy sword and your reflexes is an acquired skill,

ONCE YOU GET ACQUAINTED WITH *UNREAL CHAMPIONSHIP 2*, IT'S PLAIN TO SEE IT ISN'T JUST ANOTHER *QUAKE III: ARENA*.



Is that an armored scarab or is she just happy to see us?







EVERY CHARACTER HAS A UNIQUE SET OF POWERS, WEAPONS, AND MELEE ATTACKS, AND A BALANCE OF SPEED VERSUS STRENGTH.

the payoff itself is handsome.

One new feature picked up during the hand-to-hand brainstorm is *Championship 2*'s optional third-person perspective. Removed from the first-person view, players receive a massive increase in character and environmental awareness. What followed next was the decision to include wild, gravity-defying acrobatics.

All character types have not only the prowess to double-jump, but also the ability to scale heights by bouncing off walls. Capps calls the added mobility in *Championship 2* the most seminal change to the series. But the idea was nearly vetoed. Early on, when gameplay programmer Steve Superville debuted the mechanic, he received a fairly shocked reaction from the team. "We were like, 'You crazy f***er! What are you doing to [*Unreal Championship*]?!'" Capps recalls. Eventually, both melee and the added third-person platforming elements became cornerstones of level-building, combat, and character design.

CHARACTERIZATION

The cast of more than 15 different characters in *Championship 2* was a long time coming. Character differentiation was actually meant to make a difference in *Unreal Tournament 2003*, but balancing a shooter with so many variables proved much harder than expected.

"It's been an overwhelming challenge. That's one of the reasons it was pulled out of *2003*," Capps says. "[To simplify things], they ended up having just this 'mutator' where you would start with different weapon sets." *Championship 2* doesn't take the easy way out; every character has a unique set of six "adrenaline" powers, exclusive weapons, individual melee attacks, and a tender balance of speed versus strength.

Citing fighting games as a major influence, Capps says you can probably peg the characters as the source of the other major change in *Championship 2*. "The start of melee, in a weird way, was this notion of you pick a character, I pick a character. I see your choice of arena, I pick my weapons based on that choice. That sort of meta game is the same kind of feel that we were looking for, back

GO FOR YOUR GUNS

Designer Jim Brown explains why Epic simplified the arsenals in the sequel: "With a console controller, when you've got 10 or 15 weapons, you're cycling through trying to find the one you want and by the time you find it you're dead." Instead, every combatant always has four weapons – character-specific pistols, unique melee weapons, one of four explosive weapons, and one of four energy weapons. Explosive weapons like the rocket launcher or flak cannon deal wide-area damage, while energy weapons like the shock rifle and Stinger have a focused attack. Lest the arsenal sound limited, every weapon has alternate fire and combo attacks, like splitting "drunken rockets" and linkable shock mines.



How many guys does it take to create *Unreal Championship 2*? Give or take, 30.

and forth in the living room." Giving *Championship 2* participants that feeling of specialization—unlike in a PC shooter, where the playing field is, for better or worse, always level—was the impetus that first kicked the snowball of ideas down the slope.

UNDER THE HOOD

Technology also sets *Championship 2* apart from its predecessor. The game runs on a new engine derived from its PC cousin, *Unreal Tournament 2004*, but the Xbox's single hardware configuration offers a significant programming advantage for Capps and his team. "We can heavily optimize our rendering pipeline to take advantage of special features not available on the PC," lead programmer Joe Graf says. The results are literally in your face. "We are right on the edge of what the Xbox is capable of."

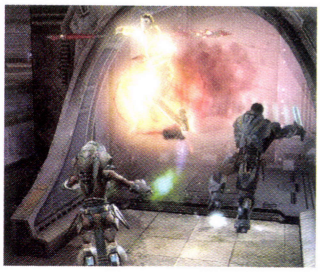
Aside from looking incredibly detailed and smooth, *Championship 2*'s graphical trickery also enhances gameplay. "The visceral effects you see when doing a perfect [projectile] deflection," Graf adds, "the nice screen distortion for 'repulse', or the flash of the characters when they're hit are all good examples of how purely visual effects can enhance the feel of the game."

Switching to sniper mode, for instance, triggers a mix of color burn and radial blur around the scope, while depth-of-field effects blur the environment and focus on targets. That helps balance out a sniper's overwhelming firepower—move around while zoomed in and the shifting focus makes the game nearly unplayable.

HOME STRETCH

The remaining challenge with *Championship 2* lies with melee combat. The team is working to nail the sensation of feedback, so players can feel the flow of exchanging blows at close range. "There needs to be a substantial hit (or even whiff) feel to all the melee attacks," producer Matt Norton explains. "We've been experimenting with different combinations of visual, sound, and vibration effects to get that message across to the player in a way that feels good without being overpowering or distracting." //









SON OF LIBERTY

METAL WOLF CHAOS, MASANORI TAKEUCHI'S LATEST XBOX DESTRUCT-A-THON, IS A MICHAEL MOORE NIGHTMARE COME TRUE

Only in Japan would someone ask the question of our election year candidates: Who would make the better mech warrior—Bush or Kerry? For From Software visionary Masanori Takeuchi, the question, which inspired the theme for his latest project, began as a joke between friends. Personally, he's torn—John Kerry fought in Vietnam, but George Dubya trained as a fighter pilot. Judging by the hero of his hypnotic shooter *Metal Wolf Chaos*, President Michael Wilson—Lone Star gunslinger and son of a former president—Takeuchi obviously envisions George W. Bush at the helm of a deadly power suit. Symbolically speaking, of course.

This is the world of *Chaos*, where in the year 2040, the 47th president of the United States combats terrorism by manning a huge, bright red mech. Full-fledged war has reached every corner of the United States, from New York to San Francisco. Florida is once again—quite literally—a presidential battleground. The game presents America's war on terror through the eyes of a team of Japanese game designers led by Takeuchi. Having first delved deeply into traditional Japanese art and folktales in the acclaimed *Otogi* series, Takeuchi now paints his version of America 35 years in the future.

Starting with a modified *Otogi 2* engine, Takeuchi's team has done more than replace Japanese lanterns and drum bridges with famous American backdrops for *Chaos*. A strong dose of filtered pop-Americana has been injected into a genre of Eastern obsession—namely, giant robots with big-ass guns. The result is an action game that has all the familiar military trappings of a title you're likely to see on Xbox, yet looks and feels completely foreign.

"The concept for *Metal Wolf Chaos* is something I've had in my head for a number of years," Takeuchi says. "I figured it would be a nice change of pace before I get back into the world of *Otogi*." With *Chaos*, Takeuchi completes a trio of Nippon-powered action opuses on a console that's hopelessly American.

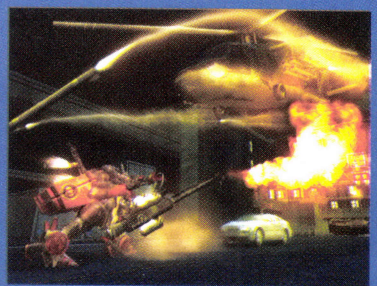
But after disappointing sales for *Otogi: Myth of Demons* and *Otogi 2: Immortal Warriors*, it's downright puzzling how From Software continues to fund Takeuchi's continued devotion to Xbox. The *Otogi* series remains a critical darling but has fallen flat at retail on both sides of the Pacific. Americans showed their disinterest by purchasing fewer than 60,000 copies of the first *Otogi*. Japanese gamers bought 17,000 copies of *Otogi 2*.

"It's a bit of a struggle to continue releasing games on Xbox. Luckily, sales were enough to cover development costs. But only barely," Takeuchi, who wants to focus on game design and not dollars-and cents-politics, explains. "I support Xbox

METAL WOLF CHAOS PRESENTS AMERICA'S WAR ON TERROR THROUGH THE EYES OF A TEAM OF JAPANESE GAME DESIGNERS.

When *Metal Wolf Chaos* ships this December in Japan, players can log on to Xbox Live to upload high scores and access downloadable content. As if the game's 100 weapons aren't enough to choose from, new weapons will periodically be made available on Xbox Live, along with new background music. Work will soon be underway to affix 1-on-1 online battles to the North American version when it ships this spring. From Software has yet to reveal the game's U.S. publisher.





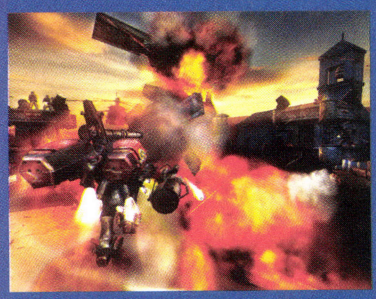




The presidential battleground in swing-state Florida takes an explosive turn of events.









■ In *Metal Wolf Chaos*, the president's mech stores his weapons in two large barrel-like containers on his back. When he needs to swap out weapons, these pentagonal containers spread open like wings, allowing him to pick his weapon of choice.

simply because it's the only hardware powerful enough to handle the games I see in my head."

An action-game designer by trade, Takeuchi dreams in a fragile world where buildings crumble at the touch of a sword or the snap of a stray bullet. The *Otogi* series encapsulates this aesthetic, coloring it with a festival of light and traditional Japanese flavor. Now *Metal Wolf Chaos* brings the spectacle to American soil.

LONE WOLF AND CHAOS

The game begins at the doorstep of the White House. Tanks, helicopters, and foot soldiers form a phalanx in protection of their leader, a sinister vice president of the United States, Richard Hawk, who's now a dictator through a coup attempt in conjunction with the U.S. Army. Desperate to regain control (and bring back liberty for all), the president mans a secretly developed power suit and takes this "terrorist" faction head-on. The game's B-movie plot, complete with cheesy dialogue, and ridiculous cast of characters (including a sexy female mission correspondent) are so over-the-top that *Chaos* actually ventures into the realm of overt political satire. The game is 100 percent ridiculous and 100 percent old school.

But as in *Otogi*, the game's story takes a backseat to something far more important—the moment-to-moment action of your onscreen avatar. The president's agile power suit keeps the gameplay moving at a furious pace. Players can fire off a variety of satisfying payloads (chain gun, shotgun, rockets, grenades, missiles, and much more) by using both L and R triggers, all while zigzagging around opponents *Otogi* style, racking up a string of attack combos and millions of dollars in property damage.

"Blowing up stuff is fun. It's universal," Takeuchi responds when he's asked about the highly destructible environments in his games. "Destruction is a main theme simply because it's something players enjoy regardless of their nationality."

The president makes an executive decision to demolish a tank in Times Square, New York.

In *Chaos*, the 14 stages it takes to win back America's liberty read like a guidebook of U.S. landmarks for tourists—settings include Miami Beach, Beverly Hills, Times Square, and San Francisco's Chinatown. While the levels themselves are relatively short, they pack plenty of replay value.

As in the *Otogi* games, an elaborate ranking system encourages perfect level runs and exploration for secrets. Xbox Live will play host to player rankings that are based on a variety of statistics, from the number of buildings leveled to the highest chain combos (which can be greater than 300 hits, according to one From Software tester).

POLITICAL MINEFIELDS

Early in the game, the battle moves to Alcatraz. The former prison is a playground of havoc as the player encircles the island destroying its defenses, gradually tightening the noose on the army's makeshift base. The story takes a profound turn when the army fakes a mass suicide while television cameras roll and the public is led to believe that the true terrorist is actually the president. In post–September 11 America, these are heavy themes to present, no matter how tongue-in-cheek the dialogue may be.

"One of the reasons we added humor to the game was to soften the theme of America being tricked and overrun by terrorists," Takeuchi says. "But we don't want to come off as if we are making fun of America. I don't want people writing off the story, saying it came from an ignorant Japanese perspective."

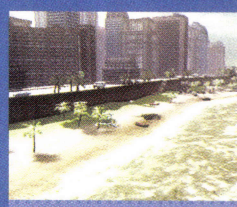
But he clearly is no fool when it comes to American politics. "I certainly have opinions on America, but I'm no politician. I can't even vote [in this year's election]," Takeuchi says. "So I use the game to insert a little bit of my personal opinion to get a message across." One point Takeuchi hopes to get across is his outlook on the modern American presidency.

"The current model of the U.S. presidency really hasn't evolved," Takeuchi explains. "Back during the Cold War, I think it was appropriate for nations like America to flex their muscles. But now I just wonder why the U.S. government is willing to do anything to be No. 1 and how so few Americans question this."

Takeuchi's team will have little time to rest once development on the Japanese version of *Chaos* concludes this winter. Although a Stateside publisher has yet to be announced, Takeuchi is absolutely confident that *Chaos* will see a U.S. release in spring 2005. At that time, additional game content will be created in preparation for *Chaos*' American debut.

"You might be surprised to hear this, but development of *Chaos* began in April of 2004," Takeuchi says proudly, meaning the game will have taken just eight months to finish when it ships this December in Japan. Drawing from past experiences with the *Armored Core* series, he says his team has learned a lot. "But the truth is," he begins, "I know other developers work really hard on their games; it's just that we work harder." //

"DESTRUCTION IS THE MAIN THEME SIMPLY BECAUSE IT'S SOMETHING PLAYERS ENJOY REGARDLESS OF THEIR NATIONALITY."



Arizona's historic Old Towne, the flickering neon signs of San Francisco's Chinatown, and Chicago's financial district can be laid to waste with a few well-placed missiles, each collapsing on enemies and scoring big combos as a reward. The Lincoln Memorial, however, remains thankfully invulnerable.



WHEN ALIENS ATTACK

...Kiss your ass good-bye

WORDS: GREG ORLANDO



DESTROY ALL HUMANS LOOKS AND FEELS LIKE A 1950S B-MOVIE UPDATED WITH EMERGENT, NONLINEAR GAMEPLAY.

"All you of Earth are idiots."—Eros, *Plan Nine From Outer Space.*

People of Earth, the end is nigh. Aliens from a distant planet are about to harvest human brain stems for our precious DNA. Expect mass panic as entire cities are decimated and military forces are humbled by extraterrestrial technology. It is time, people, to drop trousers and bend over for the collective probing.

At the heart of the destruction is Cryptosporidium-137, a gray-skinned, red-eyed alien known as a Furon—and the star of Pandemic's latest action sandbox, *Destroy All Humans*. As an agent of the Furons, Cryptosporidium has been sent to revive his dying race by collecting Furon DNA, which has been seeded in human brains on Earth. His heart's desire, however, is to destroy all humans—an objective in which you play no small part.

"Cryptosporidium-137 is the 136th clone of Crypto—what his friends call him," Brendan Andrews, head of Pandemic Studios' Australian office says. "He likes an eclectic range of music, feeling the sand between his toes while walking along the beach, and toying with the human race for his own amusement. Like the rest of his race, he sees humans as an annoyance, and if he can have some fun swatting the flies that annoy him, well, all the better."

It is also important to note that Cryptosporidium is badly wired—that is to say, he's fairly well bonkers. "He's been a little blemished by his cloned DNA," Carey Chico, Pandemic's executive art director says.

MIND GAMES

As an angry stranger in a strange land, Cryptosporidium can wreak havoc in open-ended *Grand Theft Auto* fashion (i.e., go anywhere, vaporize anything) in the kind of urban environment you'd find on the back lot of Universal Studios.

Although he is physically weak, his mental powers put him far beyond the *Quiz Kid* set. He can utilize psychokinesis to pick up and move objects with his mind or attack foes with a PK push that hurls objects away from him with great force. Mind over matter also allows this angry E.T. to scan human cerebrums to extract thoughts, harvest DNA by sampling brain stems, and override weak human wills, compelling his victims to do his bidding. Cryptosporidium can also trick impressionable Earth folk into believing he is human by using "Holo Bob," an illusory power allowing the alien to look like anyone he encounters.

Reading puny earthlings' minds reveals mostly nonsense. "Maybe I'd better go back to the two-martini lunch!" a vapid businessman muses when probed. But other human brains will contain information valuable to his mission at hand. Inside a scientist's brain is the secret to meeting the president of the United States. Military men will be able to reveal the whereabouts of Cryptosporidium's missing energy weapon or the password needed to get on a barge to a hidden area. A neat twist has Cryptosporidium's powers working more effectively on humans with weak wills and less so on the strong-minded. Holo Bob, for example, works best when Cryptosporidium is trying to deceive only one human from a distance.

CRUISIN' U.S.A.

The free-roaming Cryptosporidium can travel where he will, probing humans or simply running amok with his multipurpose ray gun. A jump jet allows him to fly in short, controlled bursts, and no alien worth a lick of salt would be complete without a cloaked saucer fully equipped with an abducto beam, a sonic boom cannon, a quantum deconstructor, and a death ray. Here, great vengeance can be enacted on human cities and their populations.

Gameplay is split about 60/40 in favor of missions on foot, Chico suggests, or perhaps even a 70/30 split. But this figure is fairly irrelevant, considering the now-standard *Grant Theft Auto*-style go-anywhere, do-anything play; *Humans*' great appeal, aside from its unique viewpoint, is its freedom of opportunity.



ALIENATION

When our anti-hero gets captured by the G-men—the game's equivalent of the Men In Black mythos—the order of the day is to escape from a cage surrounded by an electric-blue energy field. To extricate himself, Cryptosporidium can use a variety of methods. He can use a hypno blast to persuade lurking guards to shut down the energy field and open the cage, or he can simply order the guards to go to sleep while he frees himself with psychokinesis. From there, the mission opens up, with Cryptosporidium receiving objectives from his superior, Orthopox—he must recover both his gun and his spaceship, which the humans have taken. How you choose to get him there is all a part of the (un)game design. Along the way, it's perfect fun to pick up soldiers and hurl them into the ocean or take possession of their minds and order them to create a diversion (in one case, having them dance like a certain swivel-hipped King of Rock and Roll).

Although the game's title suggests Cryptosporidium would best be served by adopting Rambo's school of diplomacy, there is a catch to his alien superiority. "If you do open up and take down as many [humans] as you can," Andrews says, "you'll only make your life and missions more difficult. There's a certain challenge and good amount of fun in that alone—but the trick is balancing the covert with the overt, to use not just the technology but the powers the humans have to your advantage." Excessive slaughter, while amazingly fun to pull off, creates widespread panic and brings both the G-men and standard military units, both of which can overwhelm a Furon by virtue of sheer numbers.

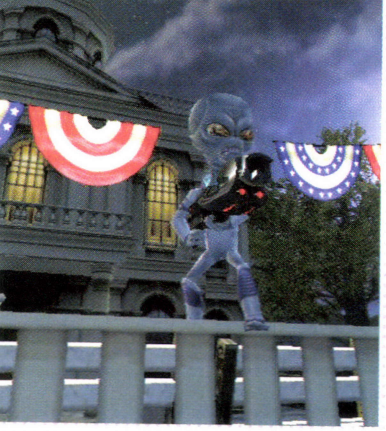
EARTH ATTACKS!

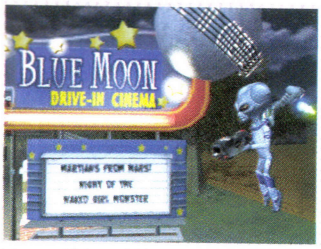
"Identify yourself, calcium-filled Earth creature!" Crypto snarls at a cow. Later, he'll wander into a drive-in movie theater—one playing the Ed Wood classic *Plan 9 From Outer Space*—and muse, "You think you can destroy us so easily!"

Truly alien to the ways of Earth, Cryptosporidium becomes not only a unique protagonist, but also a means by which developer Pandemic and THQ can turn the well-worn theme of invaders from outer space on its ear.

Humans looks and feels like a 1950s B-movie updated with emergent, nonlinear gameplay. The game is obsessively referential, citing pop influences throughout its odyssey. *Humans* is at once a tribute to pulp sci-fi and a worthy contribution to its canon—as well as a critical look at humanity. "We're all humans, and we can laugh at ourselves [through the game]," Chico says.

The probing begins in 2005. //









FUTURE

DESTROY ALL HUMANS

As an interesting side note, part of Cryptosporidium's quest on Earth will be to discover the whereabouts of his missing clone Cryptosporidium 136. Rumor has it the puny Earthlings have captured him and are holding him for interrogation and, later, dissection and autopsy at a military base in New Mexico. Above, Cryptosporium plans an assault on the people who have kidnapped him and stolen his weapons.



E.T. phoned home for a death ray.

An alien with a well charged Zap-o-Matic ray is a happy alien.



X-FILE #463: THE FURONS

Little is known about this alien race. Recovered specimens—also called Grays—oddly enough, have all been males with psychic powers and the same size feet. Intelligence reports from interrogated Furons suggest the race has brought the following technologies to Earth: beer, doughnuts, electric toasters, push-up bras, and aerosol cans. It is suspected these technologies were transmitted to humans during abductions.

Their home planet is unknown. Their purpose on this planet is unknown. Although physically unimpressive, their advanced technology and superior mental powers make them formidable foes. They are armed and considered dangerous. All sightings should be reported to The Majestic.

Furon Weaponry

Captured Furon agents generally destroy their weaponry before it can be seized. But eyewitness accounts of Furon attacks indicate their guns hold three separate weapon forms: a zap-o-matic, which shoots pulsed bursts of blue electricity that cause a painful and convulsive reaction in organic forms and cripple machinery; an ion detonator, which fires a powerful charged-particle grenade that explodes on contact or after a short period of time; and a disintegrator ray, which vaporizes anything it comes in contact with.

Any sightings of Furon attacks or recovered weapons should be reported to The Majestic.

Furon Mind Powers

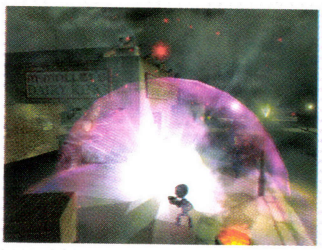
The extent of Furon mind powers is unknown. It is suspected this power is not limitless. Captured Furons have exhibited the ability to create the illusion they have taken human form; they can, in effect, impersonate anyone they so choose. Telekinetic abilities allow them to pick up and hurl items without physical exertion or issue blasts of energy that repel objects away from them.

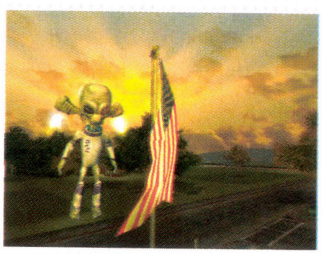
Using telepathy, Furons can read human thoughts and implant suggestions into human minds. Once usurped, the affected human can be ordered to follow the Furon, go to sleep, or even act against his will to perform whatever action the alien selects.

Most disturbing, Furons can extract human brain stems. Weakened aliens seem rejuvenated by this process, as the stems seem to hold some healing factor. The purpose or exact means by which this is accomplished is as yet unknown.

Majestic agents are urged to monitor local law-enforcement agencies for evidence of widespread human behavior indicative of Furon mind control.

Note: The Majestic organization does not, in fact, exist. Please disregard all mention of such. You have been warned.





XRATED

SMART REVIEWS DECEMBER 2004

XBOX

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BUNGIE CUTS THE CORD

Halo 2 finally leaves the Microsoft mothership

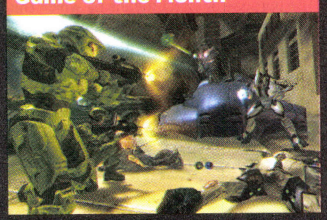
It has seemed like an interminable wait. From the first glimpse of *Halo 2* at Microsoft's XO2 event in 2002 to sitting down with the finished code in early October 2004, there's been rampant speculation, precious little single-player information, and zero insight into the plot of the most eagerly anticipated videogame this generation. Expectations are, in truth, impossibly high. How could Bungie follow up on the first FPS game on a console since *GoldenEye* to feel as if it were born to be played with a controller? How could the company possibly match the unexpectedly epic feel of *Halo*'s Silent Cartographer level or the apprehension that came with seeing a hunter for the first time?

To find out, you need just turn the page, where our exhaustive eight-page review reveals all.

Some 20-plus other games receive the critical treatment in this month's Xrated section. Tecmo's online brawler *Dead or Alive Ultimate* arrives. Old favorites Tony Hawk; Rocky "The Italian Stallion" Balboa; dragons Bub, Bob, and Spyro; and Larry, he of the leisure suit, return to videogame glory or, perhaps, infamy. And it seems publishers have decided to carpet bomb the Xbox with dreck aplenty in the hopes of cashing in. Fingers are pointed squarely at you, *Bad Boys: Miami Takedown*, *SVC Chaos: SNK vs. Capcom*, and *The Dukes of Hazzard: Return of the General Lee*.

DECEMBER XRATED AWARDS

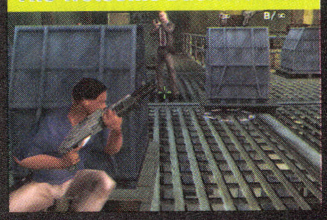
Game of the Month



Halo 2
Microsoft

For its selfless efforts to eliminate work in the *Xbox Nation* offices, *Halo 2* wins a Nobel Prize and, more importantly, *Xbox Nation*'s coveted Game of the Month award.

The Welcome Back Kotter



(TIE) Bad Boys and The Dukes of Hazzard

Sometimes, when the marketing guy says, "I think we should make a game about [insert dated license here]," instead of being cheered, he should be shot in the head. Twice.

Best Minigame



Rocky Legends
Ubisoft

Chicken chasing made the *XBN* staff members what they are today: greasy-fast Italian tanks who eat lightning, crap thunder, and are thus extremely hard on toilets.

Good! Punctuation Award?



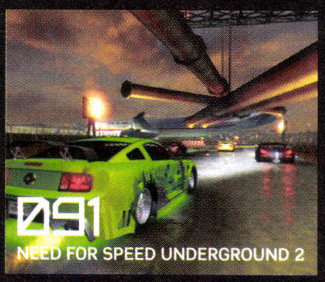
(TIE) Yourself! Fitness and N.U.D.E.@

Because! it is good. To? Punctuate for emphasis# and? clarity. *Yourself! Fitness* and *N.U.D.E.@*...represent the& pinnacle. of good writing! Congratulations



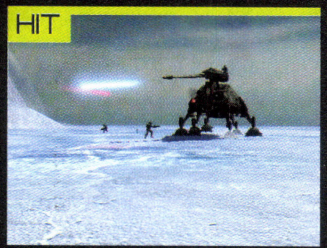








LAST MONTH'S HIT OR MISS



Star Wars Battlefront
LucasArts

Thou shalt not kill, unless you've got a blaster and are pointing it at an Ewok. It also helps if you scream, "THIS IS FOR RUINING *RETURN OF THE JEDI*!" when you do it.



Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 2: Battle Nexus

Normally, when there's a car wreck, the authorities clean it up instead of packaging it on an Xbox disc and selling it for $40. Not so with the multicar pileup *Battle Nexus*.

MAKING THE GRADE

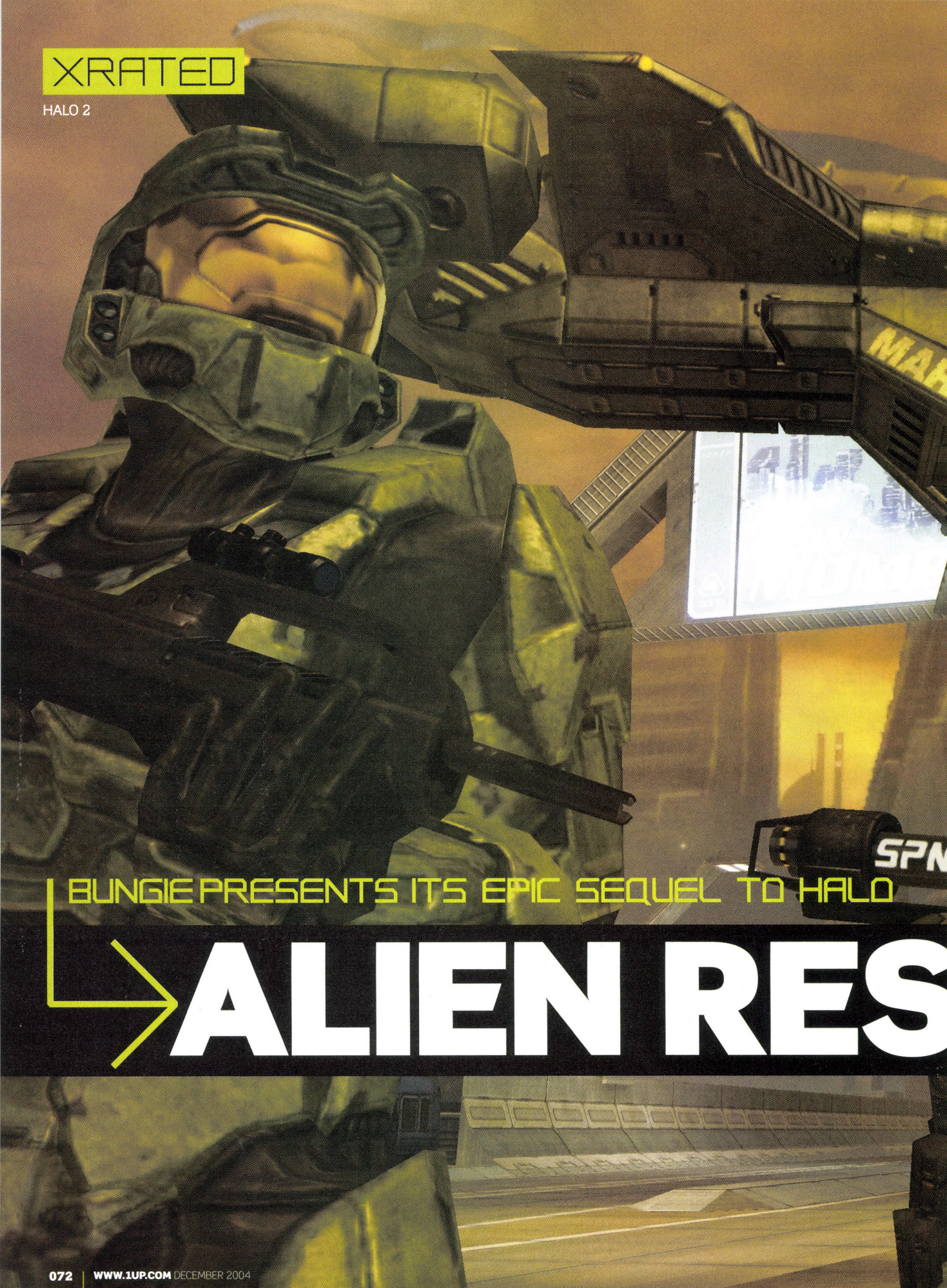
The score's the thing...

Celebrate greatness. Flush video feces. This is the mandate *Xbox Nation* game reviewers are given and the philosophy its critics operate under. *XBN* strives to be harsh but fair in its scoring; with games costing upward of $50, no one benefits from reviews with padded scores, least of all you.

Breaking down the review scores, you'll find a game with a score of one is Satan's bedchild. Two indicates raw sewage. Three is embarrassing. Four is flawed. Five equals average. Six is all right. Seven is good, eight great. Nine is excellent, and 10 out of 10 is brilliant, and as near to a perfect experience as it's possible to get.

XBOX LIVE

Look for this handy orange box describing a game's Xbox Live content. As always, Xbox Live content will be factored in to achieve a holistic final grade.



BUNGIE PRESENTS ITS EPIC SEQUEL TO HALO

ALIEN RES

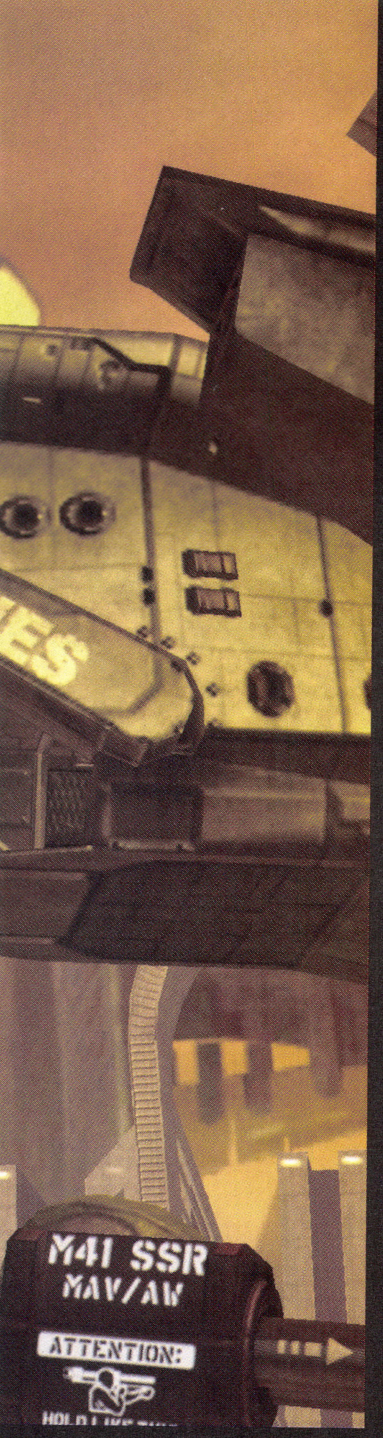
HALO 2

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** // DEVELOPER: **Bungie** // PLAYERS: **1-16** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **M**

Combat refined

It's been a long time in the works, but in the autumn of the Xbox's existence, Microsoft and Bungie have pulled off the console's greatest coup. As the sequel to perhaps the greatest console first-person shooter ever, *Halo 2* does tread new ground, but it does so tentatively and with baby steps; the game offers evolution, not revolution. More weapons and vehicles are added to the pile. It's possible to hold two guns at once and fire them at the same time to great, and greatly destructive, effect. New maneuvers allow vehicles to be hijacked while in motion, and certain craft possess the ability to put on bursts of speed for short periods of time. The addition of environments on Earth gives these particular battles an emotional weight that's almost tangible—this time, with Master Chief's home turf at stake, it really is up close and personal.

As ever, the controls remain the standard for console FPSes. Bungie has tweaked things to allow for multiple-weapon acquisition and usage, but otherwise, it was far from broke and certainly didn't warrant fixing. The game succeeds in great part because of the intuitive control scheme. The three people who've yet to play *Halo* will need about four minutes (all told) to become acquainted with what does what on the Xbox controller. After that, everything from moving to firing becomes second nature, freeing you to concentrate on the important stuff, such as blowing up the stuff that explodes in the most delightful ways. »





URRECTION











HALO 2 TAKES ANY SHORTCOMINGS AND SWALLOWS THEM WHOLE

This sugarcoats the bad medicine that should be quickly swallowed: The game—though stunning by anyone's standards—repeats some of the original *Halo*'s failings, chief among them the repetitive level designs. Also, because the concepts presented here are no longer particularly new or fresh, these flaws seem magnified this time around.

However, to its lasting credit, *Halo 2* takes any of its shortcomings and swallows them whole with nary a pause for indigestion. Magnificently, time and again, the game presents battlefields and fights worthy of the Xbox's finest video warriors. These battles, they seem real. More to the point, when the lasers fly, machine guns chatter noisily, grenades explode, pieces of the battlefield get knocked around, foes crumble, and blood spills, the battles seem wonderfully dangerous.

Death never seems like a punishment. On easier difficulty settings, checkpoints are distributed charitably, and every ending provides a new opportunity to try again, to be better at aiming or taking cover, to try a different approach. On the harder difficulty levels, notably Legendary, merely existing for minute-long stretches seems a Herculean feat, but always the impetus is to get back on the horse and try one more time.

Combat is often highlighted with a pulsing guitar-based soundtrack that seems delightfully anachronistic but wonderfully tension heightening, and the harsh wail of a character's depleted energy shield serves only to exacerbate the frenzy. This is where *Halo* rings like silver and shines like gold, and the sequel never fails to serve these







BRUTISH BEHAVIOR

Hulk—er, Covenant—smash!

Although Covenant brutes are well conversant with many topics including the arts, modern Russian literature, international politics, and South American history, they much prefer dropping their weapons and physically charging anyone foolish enough to come within range.

The brutes play an integral role in *Halo 2*'s story line, serving as a Covenant faction involved in some serious intrigue. As shock troops, these burly souls prove remarkably effective, with some holding on to their weapons and firing while their comrades attempt to use their enormous mass to crush you.

One hit from an oncoming brute will effectively eliminate your defensive shield. Brutes can be killed with guns, rockets, or grenades, but their speed and toughness make it hard to put them down quickly (even an energy sword takes two hits). The best bet is to nail a brute with a plasma grenade—if it sticks, it will kill the creature—and then run like hell. Beware, though, as brutes will oftentimes attempt to take their killer down with them.



Highly religious, the Covenant order themselves by castes. They've sworn themselves the mortal enemy of man.



You can opt to drive the Warthog jeep or man its machine gun while an A.I. character makes with the driving.



wonderfully riotous moments.

New A.I. behaviors allow enemies and allies to perform more intelligently in combat, and it's now great fun to sit back and watch others do the dirty work. At one point, you find yourself storming a series of holding cells on an alien world, presenting a rather interesting opportunity to liberate imprisoned comrades. Shooting the cells' locking mechanisms frees the prisoners, allowing them to assault their captors. You can then relax and watch the carnage as the two forces slaughter one another—mutually assured destruction is certainly not assured—and either pick off the weakened survivors or step over the corpses, wholly avoiding what could be a potentially challenging and fatal brawl.

The greatly improved in-game cut-scenes do not merely push the plot forward, they also show off the human side of the game's participants. At one point, a Covenant grunt begins firing at a hologram; he's clearly spooked, and there's a sense that anyone, from Earth or a distant alien world, would have done exactly the same thing. Later on, the computer construct Cortana and Master Chief discuss the alien plan as revealed by another Covenant hologram talking in an incomprehensible tongue. When Master Chief asks Cortana if she's sure about the translation, she snaps her fingers and the hologram begins speaking English. Smugly satisfied, she snaps her fingers again to turn it off. It's a remarkably intimate moment that goes further towards illustrating Master Chief's strange relationship with the little computer woman he oftentimes carries around with him.

Indeed, the game makes a great show of playing at the relationship between its allies and enemies. Before the first shot fired in anger, cut-scenes establishing the inner workings of the Covenant are intermixed with those showing the aliens' human opposition. At once, the game firmly and undeniably establishes its dual perspective.

A new playable character (whose identity will remain, for now, unrevealed) stands as Bungie's great hook; all other improvements here to the single-player adventure are more than cosmetic but certainly less than game altering. Yet it's a little disconcerting to see that Master Chief and his counterpart are almost wholly indistinguishable from each other in the way they move and perform in combat. The defensive replenishing-shield technology they employ is identical, and the two differ only in that Master Chief can use a flashlight while the other can become invisible for brief periods. There was a tremendous opportunity here to offer two unique perspectives in terms of both story »

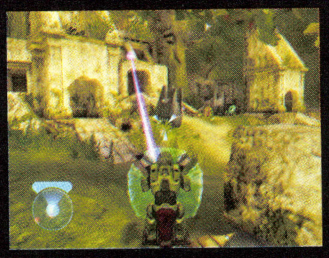
IT'S NOW GREAT FUN TO SIT BACK AND WATCH OTHERS DO THE DIRTY WORK



Weapons can be held in both hands and fired simultaneously. It's double the fun!









Kill brutes before they have a chance to perform their rush attacks.







UP CLOSE, THE HUMANS LOOK REMARKABLY UNIMPRESSIVE, WHEREAS THEIR ALIEN FOES SEEM INHUMANLY COOL AND DETAILED.

» and gameplay. Sadly, Bungie chose the safe path at best.

It's also clear that many of the indoor environments the game features are not so much alien as they are artificial. With the exception of a few inspired stages, you will find yourself wandering through the same vaguely futuristic hallways and entering rooms created by a level designer for the sole purpose of a first-person firefight. Huge ramps lead nowhere and serve no function, save for providing defensive cover or an offensive vantage point. The multitiered platforms featuring perilous drops into the life-ending void would not have been created by a race that cared about the finer things, such as continuing to draw breath. Gimmicks in the form of pistons that need to be activated to allow entrance to new areas and electric slip paths—quickly moving walkways—are embraced and then summarily dismissed once a new chapter begins, furthering the sense that none of this is real so much as it is contrived for the sole purpose of generating relentless action.

The intentionally obtuse indoor level design coupled with reheated textures served over and over again (a sin held over from the original *Halo*) ensures you will sometimes find yourself with no earthly idea as to where to proceed. When everything in front of you looks identical to what's directly behind you, it's easy to become mixed up—and Bungie's sequel certainly doesn't do much in the way of gentle nudges in the right direction.

Although bump-mapping technology has been turned, in places, up to 11, the graphics are uneven. Up close, the humans look remarkably unimpressive (particularly in light of *Riddick*'s recent visual accomplishments) whereas their alien foes seem inhumanly cool and detailed. On the other hand, there are some truly impressive touches—the water »

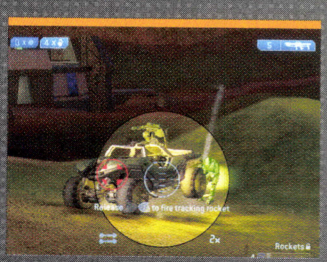
SHARING THE WEALTH

In multiplayer we trust...

Multiplayer modes supporting 16 players at a time buoy *Halo 2*, showing off all the game's strengths with none of its weaknesses.

Playable over system link, Xbox Live, or the splitscreen, the game's multiplayer modes have been dramatically beefed up. The game now supports a wealth of customization options including playing as a Covenant elite, character and team icons, and full clan support. New weapons such as the one-hit wonder Covenant energy sword dramatically alter the dynamic in terms of close-quarter combat, and the addition of boost maneuvers for certain vehicles such as the Ghost allows players to expand both their offensive and evasive repertoires.

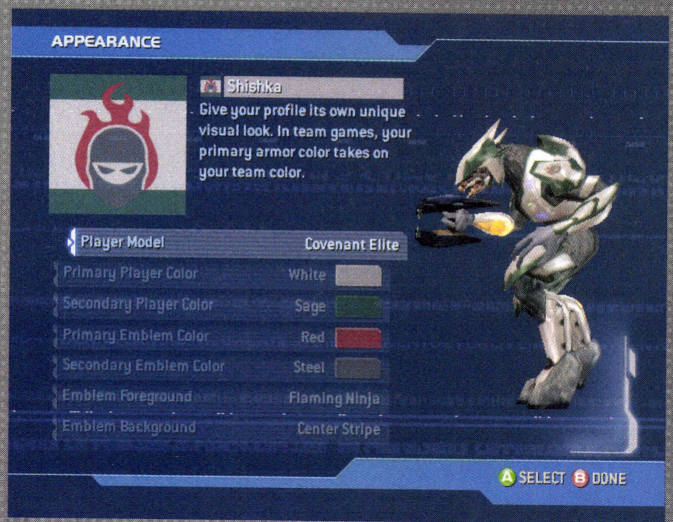
Sadly, an extended critique for the game's online play must wait until the game's general release. For now, however, it must be said that of all its new modes, including "juggernaut" and its variant "ninjanaut" seem the most quirkily appealing. Here, players attack a single, superpowered player. The goal, of course, is to become the juggernaut by eliminating the previous one and to kill a certain number of foes. In ninjanaut, the juggernaut gets two special bonuses in the form of a motion tracker and perpetual invisibility. What proceeds is ultimately challenging and enormously fun even for those who take it in the back every 10 seconds and spend more time respawning than actually playing.



Rocket launchers now have a nifty lock-on feature. Kiss one Warthog good-bye.

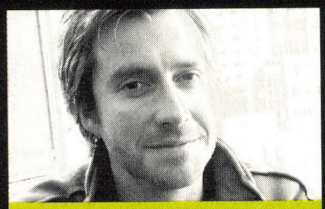


Assault mode lets players take a bomb into an enemy base to blow it sky high.





Beware the energy sword. It can kill with one hit.



Simon Cox, Editor-in-Chief

HALOPINION

No one does frantic firefights better than Bungie. Dropping into New Mombasa, manning turrets to clear landing zones, sniping back at Covenant snipers, and frantically retreating as flying aliens bring death from above, a feeling unmatched by any other console game to date.

Yet the addition of squads (while playing as either lead character) results in a mad rush through the levels with Bungie's hand pressed into your back, and the occasional feeling that—far from being the galaxy's most kick-ass hero—you're just another member of a mostly faceless cast.



Che Chou, Executive Editor

HALOPINION

Halo 2's most important leap can be seen in a series of in-game cut-scenes fleshing out Bungie's sci-fi universe. The decision to "humanize" the Covenant by giving them both characterization and motivation imbues the game with soul that Master Chief simply can't provide.

When you lock down all aspects of the single-player game for two years, fanboy backlash is par for the course. There's no way the game could silence the naysayers who expected the game to take giant steps. Now if only Bungie could release online co-op as downloadable content...







BRILLIANT MULTIPLAYER AND ONLINE OPTIONS FOREVER CEMENT THIS GAME'S STATUS AS A GENUINE CLASSIC

» effects, in-engine cut-scenes, and some of the more elaborate outdoor vistas spring immediately to mind.

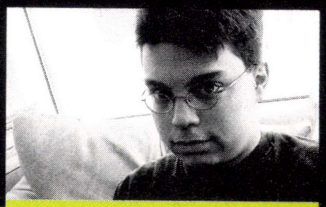
In stark contrast to the artificial-looking environments, breathless moments occur naturally (and often) within the gameplay. When a huge enemy vehicle begins stomping its way through New Mombasa, you must rush hurriedly past a series of muted brown-yellow sandstone buildings, desperately seeking a way to assault it. As the behemoth travels underneath a platform, the answer becomes astoundingly simple. One properly timed leap ensures you'll land squarely on the vehicle's deck, perfectly placed for an attack on its crew and handlers. Miss the jump, and other less-inspired methods can be employed to stop the foe; at all times, the game graciously allows you to tackle obstacles in a variety of ways.

Even the details are hammered home with efficiency. An inspired soundtrack offering everything from discordant electronic hums to placid synthesizer serenades provides aural cues—be it majesty, foreboding, or outright hostility and aggression—almost perfectly tuned for each situation or environment. Guitarist Steve Vai manages to rattle off a series of crunching guitar riffs that never devolve into cheesiness and are also seamlessly integrated into the gameplay. Guest voice acting by actors David Cross, Laura Prepon, Orlando Jones, Miguel Ferrer, and Michelle Rodriguez legitimizes the sequel's street credibility without ever seeming forced.

Brilliant multiplayer and online options top the cake and forever cement this game's status as a genuine classic. Any bumps in the road that exist in the single-player adventure melt within the context of the shared experience. Up to 16 players can hammer the holy hell



Welcome to Earth, alien scum. Please die before phoning home.

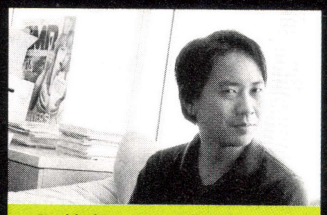


Greg Orlando, Reviews Editor

HALOPINION

The sassy computer construct Cortana plays an integral role in *Halo 2* and also provides some of the game's snappiest dialogue. "That's crazy," she yells at Master Chief upon discovering his plans for a Covenant bomb. "Fortunately for us both, I like crazy!"

Sadly, the idea of weapons wielded in both hands is better in theory than practice. While firepower is increased, accuracy seems lessened considerably and, of course, the tactical advantage grenades provide is nullified when a character has no free hands to throw them.



David Chen, News Editor

HALOPINION

Coupled with the ability to cloak (for a limited time only!), the energy sword, courtesy of the Covenant Elites, really changes the game—and for the better. Sure, it may not block enemy fire, but then again, they can't hit what they can't see.

Sadly, the grunts, Elites, and other aliens that make up the Covenant have learned a whole lot of English in the last four years. What used to be humorous, non-sequitur spurts of nonsense are now full-blown dialogues, detracting—somewhat—from the inherent alienness of it all.





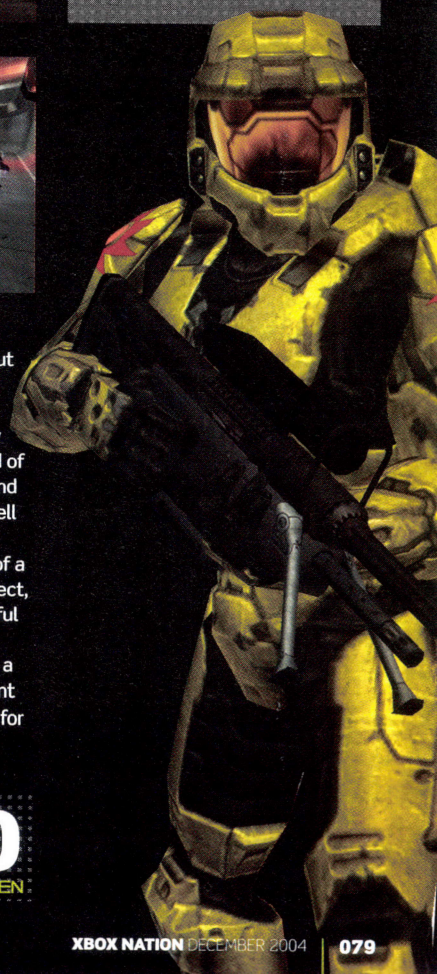
out of one another via splitscreen, system link, or Xbox Live, either cooperatively or competitively, and the experience is unequaled anywhere on any console. Even revisiting *Halo*'s Blood Gulch stands as a tankful of gas, thanks to the addition of a speed boost for the Covenant Ghosts and a powerful, one-hit kill Covenant energy sword.

The additions here are weighty and dramatically improve the options you have when choosing your challenges. Assault mode requires you to take a bomb into an enemy base to reduce it to rubble, and "territories" features teams vying for multiple objectives. Here, nothing that's added seems superfluous or out of place. The addition of clans is to be praised (see sidebar), but some may take issue with Bungie's total control of player-matching (you choose the kind of game you want to play, but they choose your opponents and matches for you).

Russian behaviorist Ivan Pavlov got dogs to salivate at the sound of a chime. With *Halo 2*, Microsoft and Bungie have created a gigantic bell that sounds like thunder and reverberates with a fury worthy of a gale-force hurricane. It's not perfect, but get in front of it, and wonderful things—wonderful destructive things—are bound to happen. It's a tremendous sequel to an excellent game, and it heralds great things for the inevitable *Halo 3*. //

Greg Orlando

XBN 10
OUT OF TEN



DEAD OR ALIVE ULTIMATE

PUBLISHER: **Tecmo** // DEVELOPER: **Team Ninja** // PLAYERS: **1-8** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **M**

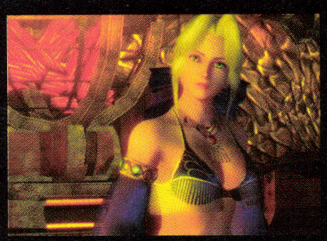
Ultimately alive and kicking

A parade of bouncing breasts this way comes, and for Xbox aficionados, it can mean only one thing: Team Ninja's *Dead or Alive* has returned for yet another round of hand-to-mammary combat. Tecmo has packed together a graphical remix of *Dead or Alive 2* and the original game in the series and has done just as the title suggests, finally putting the buxom fight online for the first time. And while *Dead or Alive Ultimate* boasts the dramatic flair of its predecessors, it regrettably inherits all of their faults as well.

While the inclusion of the original Sega Saturn version of *Dead or Alive* provides perfunctory nostalgia value, the real meat comes in the form of an updated *Dead or Alive 2: Hardcore*. The game is most successful in doing what the series has always done best; graphically superior to even Tecmo's own *Dead or Alive 3*, *Ultimate* is yet another technical showpiece for Xbox. Lush, interactive backgrounds steal the thunder this time around, providing an impressive variety of scenic backdrops to fight against. Stages have become even more interactive, adding to an element all but absent from other fighting games—the notion of exploration as players run amok through large, multitiered levels, beating the virtual tar out of one another. It's yet another small step closer to the beat-em-up, drag-em-out ideal first hinted at in the original Sega Dreamcast version.

Gameplay will also be familiar to anyone who has encountered an *Alive* game in the past five years. While it's certainly solid, it remains a far cry from that of the reigning champions—*Soul Calibur 2*, *Virtua Fighter 4: Evolution*, and the indomitable *Street Fighter* series. All of the pieces of the puzzle are in place: a large repertoire of moves, a decent number of characters (though fewer than expected), and plenty of action. But the gameplay simply lacks the depth seen in the aforementioned titles, sacrificing grace and refinement for in-your-face attitude. Matches simply fly forward with reckless abandon, too often disintegrating into dreaded button-mashing rather than being the elegant, strategic ballets of violence the genre aspires to.

The fighting genre has long been a particularly apt candidate for online competition, but it has been stifled due to a single ever-present technical challenge—lag. The persistence of lag in the world of online play has always been most problematic for fighting games, which rely heavily on an immediate, precise connection between controller input and character response. The best fighting games are tuned to the millisecond for

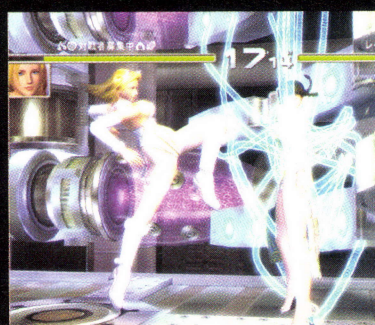




The Prince of Persia goes for a short ride to Palookaville.







Hitomi from *Dead or Alive 3* is an unlockable fighter in *Dead or Alive Ultimate*.

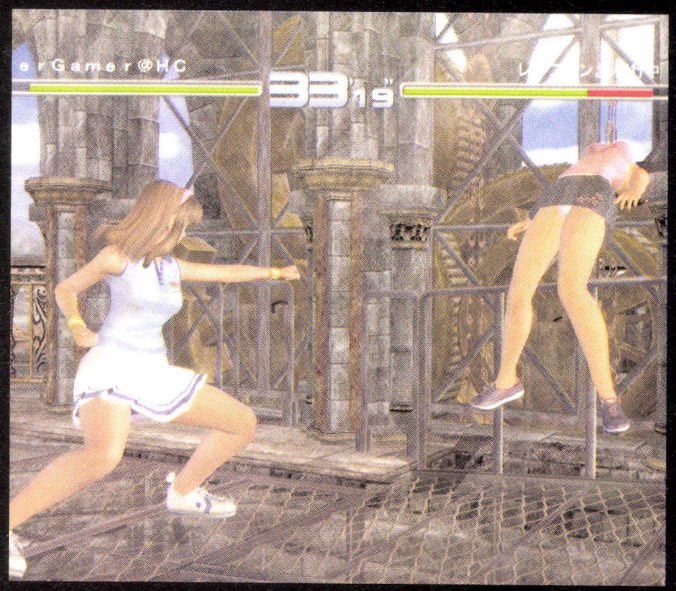
balance and control and would be all but ruined by sudden miscues caused by lag. Xbox Live's dedicated servers would seem to be the most viable forum for overcoming this hurdle; sadly, in *Xbox Nation*'s experience playing the game online, not even Xbox Live's dedicated servers are solid enough to eliminate lag from the equation.

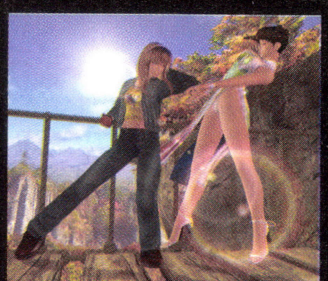
All play modes are available online and should please those looking to bring the *Alive* experience onto Xbox Live—provided the connection is a good one. Aside from a few minor innovations, however, these modes are remarkably unadventurous. After the excellent *Ninja Gaiden*, more is expected from Team Ninja; *Ultimate* is an above-average brawler and can certainly provide entertainment when consumed in short spurts, but it simply lacks the sophistication to become a contender for the fighting-game throne.

Oh, and the breasts? They jiggle a lot. //

Evan Shamoon

XBN 07 OUT OF TEN









LIVE

WATCH MODE

While only two players can do battle in *Dead or Alive Ultimate* simultaneously, the game attempts to replicate the arcade experience by giving the odd man out a "watch mode," whereby he can watch the match currently taking place, controlling the camera in the process. As the game supports up to eight players in its online play modes (tournament, kumite, survival, winner stays, etc.), the ability to watch other people duking it out and even give commentary via a Communicator headset is a very welcome addition.

N.U.D.E.@

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** // DEVELOPER: **Opus Studio** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** //

Seaman gets boobs, boring

Don't be fooled, there are no digital clothes shed in *N.U.D.E.@*, which is just an acronym for something far more boring: Natural Ultimate Digital Experiment. *N.U.D.E.@* is a Microsoft-botched experiment at designing a killer app for Japan—a dating simulator for the 21st century. Instead of memorizing factoids and navigating menus, as in the dating sims of old, you speak to an onscreen female companion using a microphone.

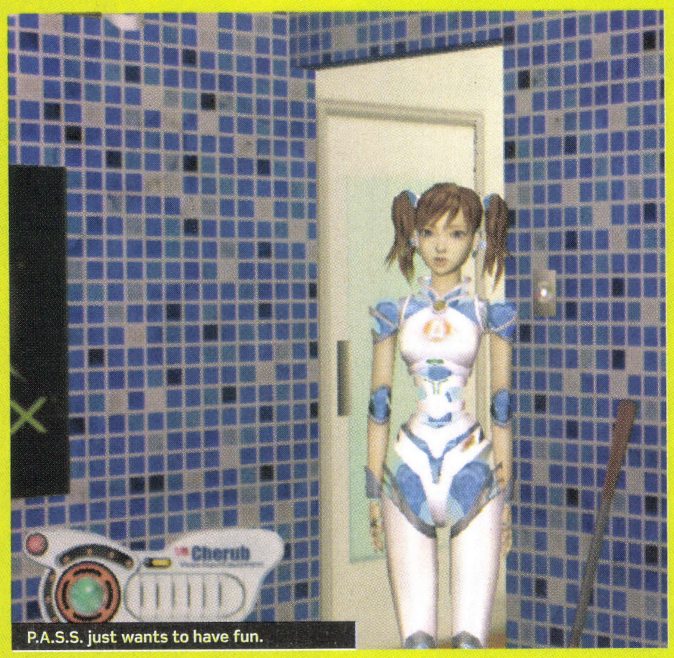
P.A.S.S. (Personal Assist Secretary System) is a prototype robot, and you are her beta tester. It's a sexy proposition: you and P.A.S.S. alone in a single-bedroom apartment where it's your job to teach her how to be an ideal Japanese lady. That's right: Teach her to clean, cook, and play rock-paper-scissors. Just what everyone is looking for in a woman.

Unfortunately, the bulk of your time will be spent teaching her new vocabulary. Move the cursor around the apartment, point to a vacuum, repeat "shojiki" enough times for P.A.S.S. to understand, and then move on to the next object. At its core, you are a verbal dictionary for a stupid robot, and it's not fun. After teaching her enough new words and the ingredients of your favorite dishes, P.A.S.S. levels up and awakens the following morning with a broader vocabulary and sharper cooking skills.

N.U.D.E.@ is impressive only on a conceptual level as players can admire what Microsoft was trying to accomplish—a virtual companion for guys to spend lonely evenings with. But the end product is anything but praiseworthy. P.A.S.S. doesn't make for much conversation. She's merely an attentive student.

Sega released a similar game called *Seaman* on Dreamcast a few years back starring a grumpy fish/man hybrid. Curiously, Seaman was better company than P.A.S.S. He was smart, funny, and fun to be with—nothing like this pricey robot bimbo. //

Ryan Payton



P.A.S.S. just wants to have fun.





XBN 04 OUT OF TEN

YOURSELF! FITNESS

PUBLISHER: **ResponDesign** // DEVELOPER: **ResponDesign** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$34.99** // ESRB: **E**

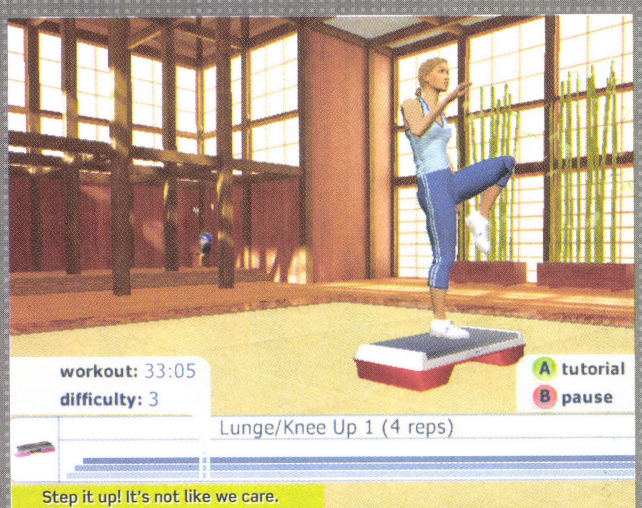
Let's get physical

***Yourself! Fitness* is surprisingly competent as a workout routine, and it's so detailed that in your custom nutrition plan, it will give you an advanced description of things like "corn flakes and banana slices," if for some reason you need one.**

The music is the only area where *Yourself! Fitness* fails. It sounds like your virtual trainer Maya's internal music protocols and her torture-all-humans protocols crossed a wire. The soundtrack was clearly made by forcing some poor audio engineer with a microphone to run into the center of a terrifying battle between drum machines and xylophones. You can track ahead to different songs in the Pause menu, but with music this awful, the only change that's recognizable is that maybe you want to scream instead of die. That said, it's kind of cute when the song changes and the ever-perky Maya insists on stopping for a second to find the new rhythm.

It's definitely a better workout than most Xbox titles, and although its longevity is infinitely better than a normal human workout video, it's not as motivating or, more important, as sexy. Plus, it's likely that too many people have seen *Terminator* to put their health in the hands of a robot. //

Seanbaby



Step it up! It's not like we care.

XBN 07 OUT OF TEN

FATAL FRAME 2: CRIMSON BUTTERFLY—DIRECTOR'S CUT

PUBLISHER: **Tecmo** // DEVELOPER: **Tecmo** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **M**

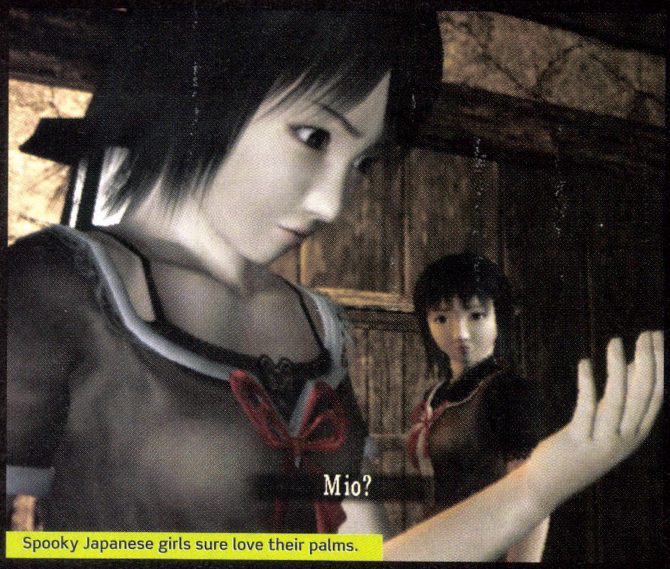
Another wonderful Kodak moment

The Exorcist **proved, without question, the freakiest image in horror is the little girl. With that in mind, the creators of *Fatal Frame 2: Crimson Butterfly—Director's Cut* were smart to cast two girls as the main characters in their game. And with the new first-person view you can play in, the creepiness of it all reaches new heights.**

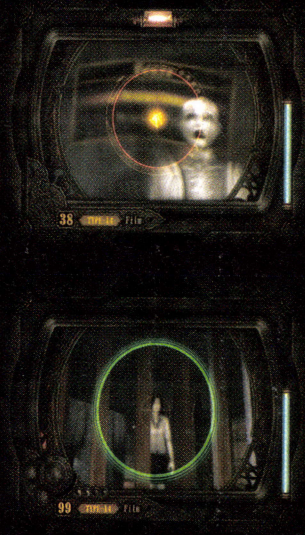
Contentwise, this *Butterfly* remains the same game it was on PlayStation 2. Armed with an enchanted camera to "exorcise" ghosts, you're meant to experience fright after fright with no real physical way of combating your enemies—taking a specter's picture stands as the only way to defeat it. Additions, small but welcome, to the Xbox version include new areas to explore and a survival mode, where you kill ghosts repeatedly. But *Butterfly*'s best new feature is its first-person camera, where every freak-out moment is made freakier because of its immediacy.

In third-person mode, it's a lot easier to convince yourself the ghosts are attacking Mio, the protagonist you guide. In first person, the ghosts are obviously coming directly at you. It's as if you're there, in the moment, seeing ghosts come out of the ground. Your twin, Mayu, follows you for most of the game, and sometimes you'll forget she's there. Then while looking around, you'll suddenly see her appear in the corner of your eye/screen. It's horrifying every time it happens, and she'll stare back at you blankly with a creepy glow lighting her face.

The graphics are standard, but that's okay, as the haunting atmosphere and foreboding music sell the game's skin-chilling story. If you have an active imagination, you might want to avoid this game. You can play it if you want, just don't plan on getting any restful sleep. // **Jason Allen**



Spooky Japanese girls sure love their palms.



XBN 08 OUT OF TEN

THE DUKES OF HAZZARD: RETURN OF THE GENERAL LEE

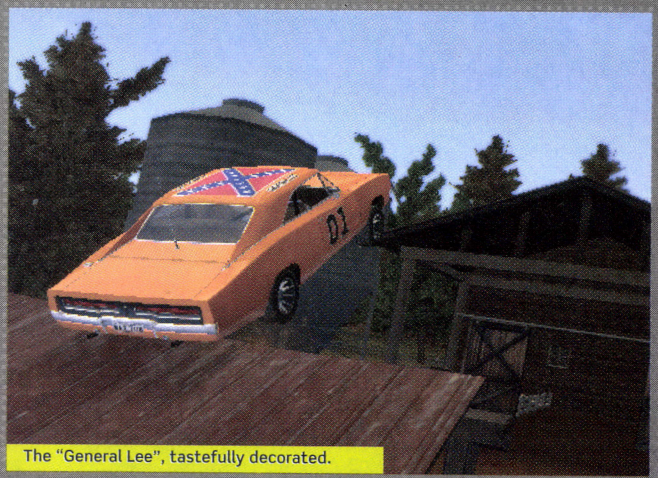
PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** // DEVELOPER: **Ratdog** // PLAYERS: **1-2** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$29.99** // ESRB: **E**

Hazzardous waste

Yeehah! *The Dukes of Hazzard* was a moderately successful TV show based on the premise of two good ol' boys outwitting a dastardly town mayor and a bumbling sheriff. Amazingly, it spawned three games—the latest of which is the mission-based driving game *Return of the General Lee*. Not amazingly, none of these games are any good.

Lee—featuring voice acting by the show's core actors—puts you in the driver's seat of the General Lee as you tool around the smallish Hazzard County like a true modern-day Robin Hood. The gameplay is *Grand Theft Auto*-esque in that you're assigned missions requiring you to fetch objects or race other cars, but there's really nothing open-ended about it. The worst part of the whole affair, aside from the mind-numbingly boring gameplay, is the wonky physics engine. You rarely get a sense of speed or weight while driving, and the controls are so awkward, the slightest steering overcorrection results in a spinout.

The story line putters along just like an episode of the show, the graphics are fairly terrible, reminiscent even of those found in PlayStation titles, and *Lee* offers no compelling reason to play for more than 20 minutes. Come on, Ubisoft—where's the unlockable Daisy Duke photo gallery with its bounty of cut-off-short shots? // **Dan DiGiacomo**



The "General Lee", tastefully decorated.

XBN 04 OUT OF TEN

X-MEN LEGENDS

PUBLISHER: **Activision** // DEVELOPER: **Raven Software** // PLAYERS: **1-4** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **T**

Rock on, children of the atom

Taking one of the hottest comic book properties at the moment and slapping it on one of the hottest *D&D* game styles can result in one thing only: a geek/nerd thermonuclear explosion of epic proportions. Or, to use its retail name, *X-Men Legends*. Raven Software's solid action-RPG puts you (or you and three friends) in control of the X-Men, and this time, a little bit of thought is required before making Wolverine go berserk on Nameless Guard No. 43.

As anyone with even limited knowledge of the comic mythos knows, the X-Men are many in number. Improper pacing, character development, or unbalanced battle dynamics can spoil the entire mix. It is good, then, that even though it had to be assumed that most people would find one favorite character and stick with him or her, Raven still managed to make playing as each hero equally entertaining. There are a couple of each type: brawlers (Wolverine, Colossus, Beast), psych-based (Jean, Emma Frost, Psylocke), and many who are multipurpose (Gambit, Cyclops, Nightcrawler). Each hero's abilities are developed and enhanced at a reasonable pace, and their uses are integrated well into the game mechanics. And though everybody levels up, even if they aren't used, the real shame is that the relatively lengthy game ends before every X-Man can be maxed out.



But *Legends* is not without fault. Story progression comes at the expense of fresh level design: Some locales are recycled twice or three times either as flashback or Danger Room sequences. A.I. teammates, when not in cooperative mode, also could have used some more work. While it never gets to the point where keeping track of your team feels like babysitting, they can't always be trusted to handle trouble on their own. They'll frequently clog up doorways or sometimes walk off ledges.

Unlike many other development studios operating these days, it is immediately obvious that Raven cares, and cares deeply, about the license it's worked with. References and allusions made to characters and events in the X-Men universe will likely be picked up only by people who have actually read the comic. Yet it is still incredibly enjoyable for those whose first exposure to the X-Men was the Bryan Singer movies. This is fan service—and cooperative gaming—done right. //

Andrew Pfister

XBN 08
OUT OF TEN



Players are encouraged to switch between X-Men often and can do so on the fly.





The trench-coat-wearing mutant Gambit has been arrested 14 times for indecent exposure.

Mutant powers can be used in conjunction with one another to create combos.











ENTER NAG-MA

While control is spread evenly over all members of the team, there is one "main" character helping to drive the story: Alison Crestmere, aka Magma. The target of a botched kidnapping attempt by the Brotherhood, Miss Magma is rescued by the X-Men and shows her gratitude by incessantly asking questions throughout the course of the game. This actually helps expose a lot of the great X-Men backstory and character development, but it still would have been funny if Cyclops just told her to go sit in the corner and shut up.

ROCKY LEGENDS

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** // DEVELOPER: **Venom games** // PLAYERS: **1-2** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$39.99** // ESRB: **T**

Legend of the chicken chaser

Odds are, you know someone who's particularly geeky about something—*Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Simpsons*, Mary-Kate and Ashley, you name it. But is anyone out there really passionate enough about Rocky Balboa and his five feel-good boxing films to justify the existence of *Rocky Legends*? It's a fine boxing game, to be sure—but so was the last one (*Rocky*, 2002), which pretty much did the job. Didn't it?

Legends' big hook is that it acts as a prequel to what you saw in the flicks. And not just for Rocky—you can also see how Apollo Creed, Clubber Lang, and Ivan Drago worked their way to the top (long before they fought the Predator, Roddy Piper, and Skeletor, respectively). But honestly, do you care?

If so, then more power to you. Minus the Italian Stallion's trek through all five movies, you're certainly getting a more complete game than the last one. *Legends* includes more than 40 boxers (more than twice as many—because you demanded Troy Miller and Jose Mendoza) and 13 venues added to the original seven (an admittedly welcome addition). Winning fights earns prize money which can, in turn, be redeemed for such wonderful unlockables as a chicken chasing minigame and vaguely Rocky-related pugilists as Ludmilla Drago, wife of Ivan.

The intuitive fighting control remains as solid as ever, with great progressive damage effects—black eyes, blood on gloves, etc.—adding to the realism. A.I. opponents even know enough to retreat when they're on the verge of being knocked down, and you really have to work your punches skillfully in order to show them the floor.

You also have to spend 40 bucks for this game, while the original—itself also free of any logical Xbox Live support—sells for less than half that. //

Chris Baker



Mr. T says: Stop with the jibba-jabba!



LIKE A ROCK

A few things you learn (but never needed to know) from *Rocky Legends*: Rocky was discovered by Mickey after a bare-fisted street fight with a guy named Joe Zale and Clubber Lang's last words upon leaving prison were, "I ain't hidin' from no one. Everyone's gonna know where I am."

XBN 07 OUT OF TEN

SVC CHAOS: SNK VS. CAPCOM

PUBLISHER: **SNK NeoGeo** // DEVELOPER: **SNK Playmore** // PLAYERS: **1-2** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$29.99** // ESRB: **T**

Chaotically evil

SVC Chaos: SNK vs. Capcom has a wonderful sense of humor, pitting heroes such as Ryu and Kyo Kusanagi against *Street Fighter III*'s Hugo and *Metal Slug*'s Mars People. That's important in a genre that takes itself too seriously. But besides its fine-tuned sense of the absurd, this is an undisciplined mess.

The problems aren't with the concept or the variations on the *King of Fighters* game systems SNK came up with to accommodate the bizarre characters. It's down to execution and sloppiness. On the gameplay side, it hasn't been tested and tuned nearly enough. Simple matters such as hit detection and the alignment of a character's body sometimes behave well outside the bounds of logic. Visually, *SNK*'s backgrounds are dull, and its animation is badly inconsistent.

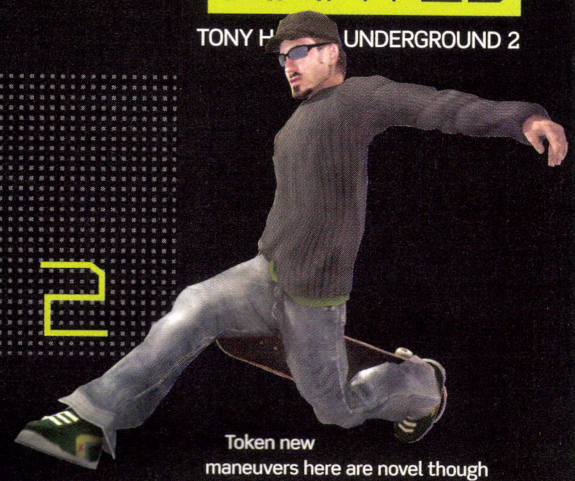
The one graphical saving grace is a partial reversal of SNK's boneheaded censorship policy. While the American version of the game features no blood and several animation cuts, there's a language option to restore the untouched version of the game. Switching it to Japanese makes the text unreadable, but that's no great loss, unless you're inordinately fond of horribly mangled English. //

David Smith



Don't feed the Geese. Hah!

XBN 03 OUT OF TEN



TONY HAWK'S UNDERGROUND 2

PUBLISHER: **Activision** // DEVELOPER: **Neversoft** // PLAYERS: **1-2** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **T**

Above board

Being the best has never seemed to faze the guys at Neversoft. Its *Tony Hawk* series has been the No. 1 extreme-sports series for years, easily outlasting the mostly inferior and forgotten competition. That being the case, the developer has become its own biggest competition, constantly needing to keep each game fresh while retaining the tight gameplay the series is known for. Last year, Neversoft achieved this by adding a narrative to its golden series, offering a nice change of pace. With *Tony Hawk's Underground 2*, the developer accomplishes its goal by doing the stock improvements—instituting a few new moves, a new story, and some creative levels—while also adding in a couple biggies.

As for the story, this year sees Hawk coheadlining the game's World Destruction Tour story mode with Bam Margera, fellow skateboarding pro and regular MTV jackass. Each leads a team across the world, trying to cause more mayhem and destruction than the other in Boston, Berlin, Sydney, and other cities.

The story mode does its job, proving both entertaining and amusing. More important, though, it holds loads of surprises that help keep things varied, including two secret characters in each level, one of which sports a unique ride as well. And while that may be cause for concern for series veterans who suffered through previous alternate-vehicle experiences—adequate at best but usually erratic—they can take comfort in knowing Neversoft handled it right this time. Be it a high-powered wheelchair or a hepped-up tricycle of the damned, each ride can make use of all skate lines, giving these characters a different feel while keeping things familiar. And when you beat the game, you open up another handful of characters, from the expected licensed appearances (Shrek) to the bizarre (a 6-foot hand).

Still, despite the mountain of unlockables, the story can't help but lose some of its appeal once it's completed, which is likely why Neversoft added the wonderful classic mode. Totally old school in flavor, this mode elevates *2* to great status by marking a return to the series' roots, bringing back goals such as collecting S-K-A-T-E and finding secret tapes in both the new levels and, better still, a handful of the old ones. It offers a simplified contrast to the story mode and gives the game a much more fleshed-out feel than the original *Underground* has. Plus, it's interesting to see how recent moves, like the off-the-board Caveman (which, like in its introduction last year, still feels floaty), work in old levels like *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2*'s Philadelphia.

Token new maneuvers here are novel though not revolutionary. With the focus control, the *Tony Hawk* series finally makes good use of the now-clichéd bullet-time effect, letting you slow things down so you can more easily nail insanely long combos. On the less important/more amusing side of things, you can now literally freak out after bailing, which nets you a few points toward your next combo.

Collectively, the sheer wealth of improvements piled on top of the already incredible core gameplay makes *2* an easy recommendation. Yes, it's similar to previous *Hawk* games at heart—certainly cause for concern for players burned out on the series—but what a monster game it is. //

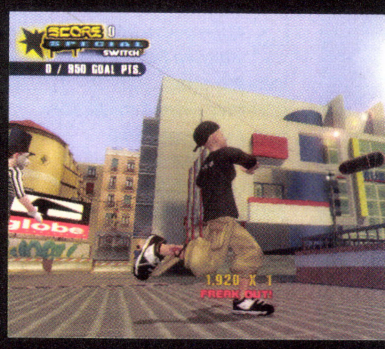
Greg Ford

XBN 09 OUT OF TEN

A skating matador truly must take the bull by its horns.



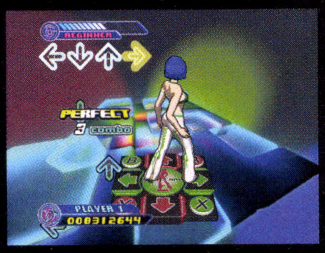




DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION ULTRAMIX 2

PUBLISHER: **Konami** // DEVELOPER: **Konami** // PLAYERS: **1-2** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **E**

You say you want a dance dance revolution?





Candy, shown above, is plotting yet another Dance Dance Revolution to overthrow the evil disco overlords. Power to the people!

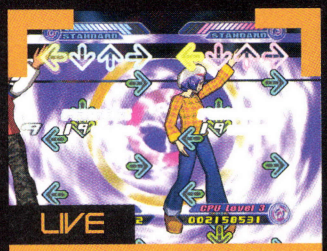
If you're all about the competition in *Dance Dance Revolution*, *Dance Dance Revolution Ultramix 2* might be right up your alley. Mostly, it's the same old match-your-steps-to-the-onscreen-arrows gameplay, but some new modes break it up a bit.

Battle mode is the Xbox-exclusive star here. You choose either to play for points or start out with points and then lose them as you miss steps. Attack mode allows you to build up combos and send attacks to your opponent, as well as block attacks from them. Bomb mode, of course, has you pass around a bomb to other players. There's also sync mode for cooperative dancing. If you lack friends, you can even play against the A.I.

Returning from the first *Ultramix* are challenge mode, in which you must complete commands such as "play without getting any boos," and the calorie-counting workout mode. Unfortunately, *2* still lacks a lesson mode, as well as the new broad song choices of PlayStation 2's *Dance Dance Revolution Extreme*, which makes it less accessible to those new to the genre and strangers to the club scene.

While the basic *Revolution* gameplay is intact and remains one of the most fun ways to exercise known to man, in truth there's not much to distinguish this version of the game. Even with all these attempts at variety, there's not much different in any of the modes compared with a typical two-player game. You're still just seeing who can match the steps better. // **Carrie Shepherd**

XBN 07 OUT OF TEN



DANCE YOUR **ASS OFF**

You can't watch other players trip over their own feet, but if you're into competition, you've got it on Xbox Live. You can participate in tournaments and matched gameplay; plus, there are rankings so that you can prove your fancy footwork to the whole *Revolution* community.

KARAOKE REVOLUTION

PUBLISHER: **Konami** // DEVELOPER: **Harmonix** // PLAYERS: **1-8** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$39.99** // ESRB: **E**

The glorious revolution continues



EXPAND YOUR REPERTOIRE

Once you're bored of *Karaoke Revolution*'s included songs, you can download more through Xbox Live. As of press time, specifics haven't been worked out, but you will be able to download packs of songs for a small fee, like you can with *DDR Ultramix*. You can't actually play *Revolution* online, though.

***Karaoke Revolution*, thy name is sloppy seconds. Coming out almost a year later than the first *Revolution*, the Xbox version lacks many of the improvements Harmonix made for PlayStation 2's *Karaoke Revolution Volumes 2* and *3*.**

The concept and gameplay here are undeniably great, and this is still arguably the best all-around party game for Xbox. Using a headset or microphone, players sing along to a variety of songs and are rated on how well they hit the notes. Unlike in regular karaoke or *Xbox Music Mixer*, you can see how high or low pitched to sing and how long to hold the note, and since vocal quality can't be rated, you can still win the game without talent. Easy mode is very forgiving, while Expert is for the truly gifted.

As fun as it is, multiplayer gameplay could use a few improvements. For one thing, the game doesn't identify players by name when it's their turn, so it's hard to remember, for example, who was "Player 5" in the midst of gameplay. There's also no medley or short song mode, which would vastly improve pacing—and which are included in the later PlayStation 2 versions of *Revolution*.

To make this version of its game unique, though, Harmonix included 10 popular Motown tunes (which, unlike the rest of the songs, are recorded by the original artists) on top of a mix of 40 mainstream hits. Plus, there's the promise of downloadable songs, which should really boost this game's value. // **Carrie Shepherd**





XBN 08 OUT OF TEN

TAK 2: THE STAFF OF DREAMS

PUBLISHER: **THQ** // DEVELOPER: **Avalanche Software** // PLAYERS: **1-2** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$39.99** // ESRB: **E**

Tak-ing care of business, every day

Your reaction to *Tak 2: The Staff of Dreams*' punnish subtitle may be a telling sign of how much you'll enjoy the game itself. If you couldn't help but groan at the wordplay, well, you likely won't have the patience to go through a whole game filled with that type of cheap humor and the generic platforming gameplay mandated to go with it. If, however, you're able to let out a smirk, you may not be too jaded to enjoy this kids' game. (Admittedly, you have every right to be wary, given the shovelware those young, less-discerning gamers usually gobble up—see *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 2: Battle Nexus*.) This one, which follows the adventures of young sorcerer Tak as he bounces between the real world and dream world trying to recover the titular Staff of Dreams, however, ain't bad.

Most important, the controls are solid, and you learn new moves throughout the adventure and can periodically turn into animals, which keeps things fresh. Bright, cartoony graphics and decent if forgettable sounds contribute to a solid presentation. And the break-up-the-monotony gimmick levels, such as riding down a river in a barrel, generally prove entertaining.

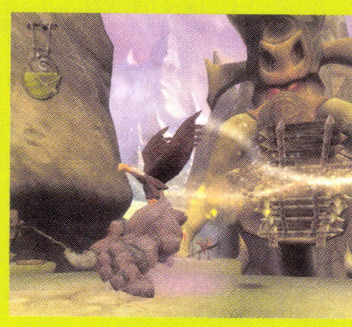
Sure, *Dreams* has its problems—a slow-moving camera, lots of hand holding, too-similar objectives, momentum-killing fetch quests later in the game, weak minigames—but those are only part of what bring it down. *Dreams* is just a by-the-numbers platformer, albeit a genuinely funny one—notably the constant bickering between Jak's master Jibolba and Jibolba's brother JB, short for Jibolba's Brother—that does what it set out to more than adequately, nothing more. But sometimes that's all it takes—not every game has to redefine the genre to be entertaining. And without a Sly Cooper or Mario the plumber to be seen on Xbox, that may be enough. //

Greg Ford



Oh, Tak. When will you ever find love?





SPYRO: A HERO'S TAIL

PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Universal** // DEVELOPER: **Eurocom** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **E**

The stop dragon our hearts around collect-a-thon blues

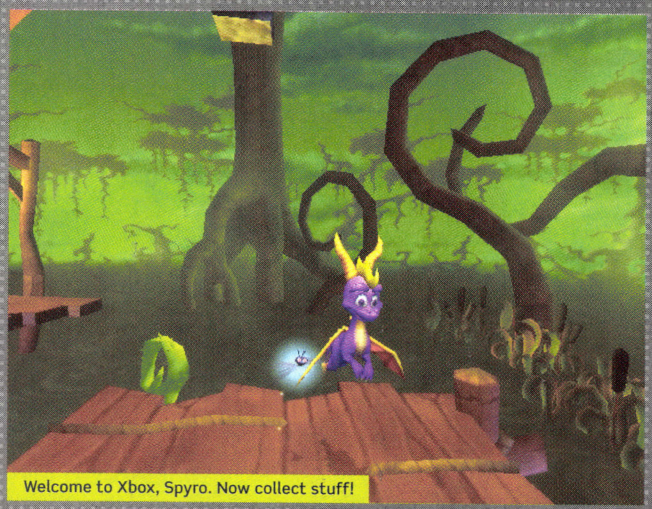
Unlike some mascots past their prime, Spyro the dragon is taking his twilight years pretty easy even if he's fallen into the same senescent collect-a-thon as every other third-rate platformer.

There's something smooth about the way Spyro moves in Eurocom's latest, making the simple act of dashing around fun. Whether you're dashing about a flat plain or gliding from pillar to pillar, the controls feel close to perfect. There's also a noticeable lack of irritation in the camera—you expect it to let you down, but it never does.

If you could do more with those controls, then *Spyro: A Hero's Tail* would soar, but as it is, Spyro has a move set straight out of *The Platforming Mascot's Handbook*, right down to the obligatory butt stomp. The parts where you control other characters to win yet more collectible items make things sort of interesting, but there's always the specter of having to go back to the main game and do the same things, ad nauseam.

Tail is better made than the last *Spyro* game, but when it sits in the same stagnating pool as every other generic 3D platform title, you might as well just pick one of them at random from the bargain bin. In that case, then, does it really even matter whose tale it is? //

Nich Maragos



Welcome to Xbox, Spyro. Now collect stuff!

XBN 06 OUT OF TEN

XBN 05 OUT OF TEN

BAD BOYS: MIAMI TAKEDOWN

PUBLISHER: **Crave/Empire** // DEVELOPER: **Blitz Games** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$19.99** // ESRB: **M**

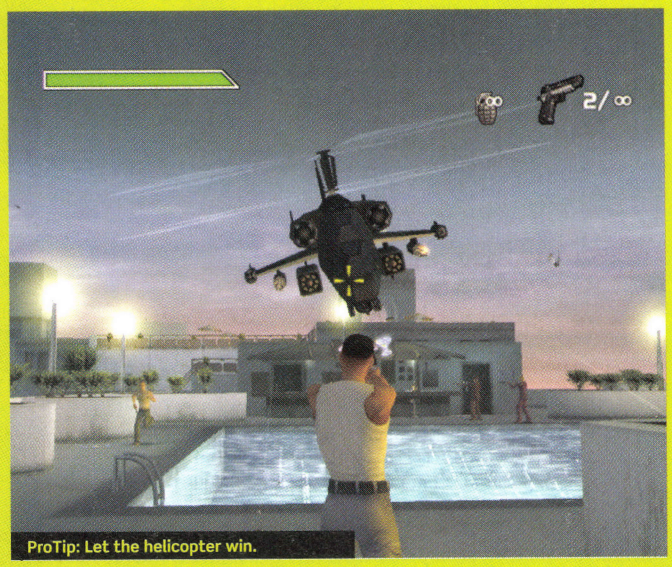
Bad boys, bad boys, whatcha gonna do when your game sucks?

No one ever accused the *Bad Boys* movies of being cinematic tours de force. Still, moviegoers looking for a decent popcorn flick got what they wanted with the films' over-the-top action mixed with the amusing interplay between Will Smith and Martin Lawrence (narcotics detectives Mike Lowrey and Marcus Burnett). Unfortunately, Smith and Lawrence have nothing to do with *Bad Boys: Miami Takedown*. And neither should your hard-earned 20 bucks.

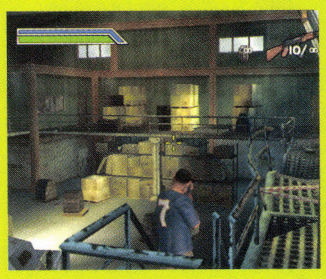
With all the beauty of a mediocre Dreamcast game, *Takedown* draws upon all the clichés of the third-person-shooter genre and never successfully offers anything you haven't already seen—presented in a much better way and with less flawed control—in the likes of *kill.switch*, *Max Payne*, and even *Dead to Rights*. When it does stab weakly at innovation, this loose adaptation of the movie *Bad Boys II* leaves you with a "Perfect Cop/Bad Boy" meter declaring you to be a "perfect cop," even if you've slaughtered 50-plus bad guys and caused $15,000 worth of damage. What's a "bad boy" have to do? Destroy the whole freakin' city? *¡Bienvenido a Miami!*

The game attempts to throw in some humor with lots of annoying banter between Mike and Marcus as they gun down waves of drug thugs, with you controlling whichever character a level assigns you (there's no two-player play, for some reason). And if Smith and Lawrence had actually voiced their characters—not these guys, who sound nothing like them—lines like a robbery's "That's my bank! You don't screw with a man's financial institutions!" might actually be funny. Instead, they fall as flat as the gameplay.

Bad boys, you have the right to sing the blues. //
Chris Baker



ProTip: Let the helicopter win.





XBN 02 OUT OF TEN

SHARK TALE

PUBLISHER: **Activision** // DEVELOPER: **Edge of Reality** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **E**

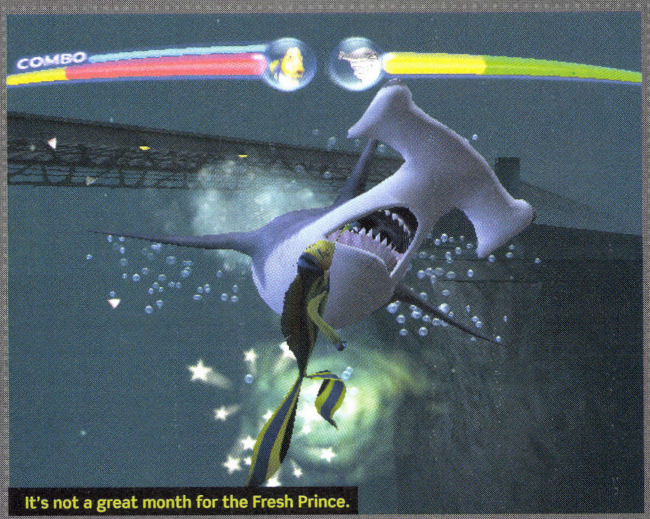
Thank you, Will, may we have another?

Fifteen years ago, kids played games such as *Contra* and *Mega Man*. Now, they're apparently supposed to play games that could be cleared by a man with no thumbs.

Shark Tale, kind of like THQ's *Finding Nemo* adaptation, is not bad looking, and it's certainly well meaning. There's also a weird appeal in watching a Will Smith–voiced fish star in *Dance Dance Revolution* knockoff minigames set to "Car Wash" and MC Hammer's "U Can't Touch This."

Once the appeal wears off, the question arises: Is this really the kind of game kids need? Perhaps the very youngest kids, sure. For youth on the higher end of the single-digit age range, why not just get them, say, a real *Dance Dance Revolution*? Or something like *Viewtiful Joe*, which is many, many times better at side-scrolling action than *Tale* manages to be in its side-scrolling action bits. Games like that are challenging, sure, but it's better to be challenging than not challenging enough. There's no sense of achievement in clearing one of this game's "elite" missions without the faintest effort.

Kids, according to the sales charts, are all over *Grand Theft Auto* and *Halo*. While giving them a more wholesome alternative to play, it couldn't hurt to give them a little credit at the same time. //
David Smith



It's not a great month for the Fresh Prince.

XBN 04 OUT OF TEN

NEED FOR SPEED UNDERGROUND 2

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** // DEVELOPER: **EA Canada** // PLAYERS: **1-6** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **E**

Go underground with these city slickers. Again.

It takes about an hour to get over the fact that while this is an arcade racer, it isn't *Burnout 3*. Indeed, it's *Need for Speed Underground 2*, and although the game doesn't rocket you through the streets at 200 mph or encourage you to slam your opponents into oncoming traffic, it is nonetheless an ambitious sequel with excellent, fun controls easily worthy of the urban racing franchise.

Throughout the game's 50-plus hours of total playtime, you'll pimp your ride, score sponsorship deals and magazine covers, and star in a variety of DVDs. All of which, of course, is supposed to be a hyperexaggerated version of what takes place in the real life of fast and furious drivers. But what's immediately apparent, even without having witnessed the in-game nonsense of a Toyota "Hachiroku" Corolla burning a Nissan Skyline in a straight-up drag race, is that *2* is true fantasy delivered courtesy of Electronic Arts.

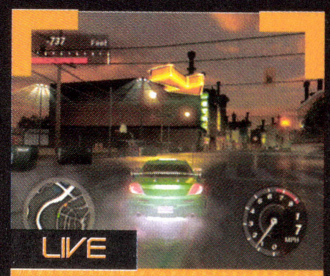
To perfect the fantasy, the boring, repetitious track designs from the last game have been replaced by one massive, open city for you to tear up and explore. Now you can drive anywhere in a megalopolis that puts even cities in the *Grand Theft Auto* canon to shame while you search for organized races and random opponents. The game requires you to follow street signs, utilize serpentine freeway systems, and discover hidden shops and shortcuts in an urban sprawl that can only be described as—well, *majestic* comes to mind.

Still, in typical EA fashion, there are omissions preventing *2* from reaching true classic status. As with the last *Underground*, your initial selection of vehicles is pitifully limited. So much so that you'll find yourself sticking with your very first car throughout most of the game simply because new rides are released slowly and without much fanfare. And since this is a game about tricking out your ride, you're forced to buy all manner of ridiculous embellishments for your slick 350Z—even if the very aesthetic repulses you to the core. Why? Because it's a gameplay requisite. Finally, the random encounters throughout the city of Bayview are fun, yet disappointingly shallow and unrewarding (in terms of dough).

Taken for what it is, however, *2* is an incredible piece of racing wizardry with literally miles upon miles of interesting terrain to uncover and traverse. Whether you can stomach (for 50-plus hours) yet another neon, moonlit, urban street racer, however, is another matter altogether. //

Che Chou

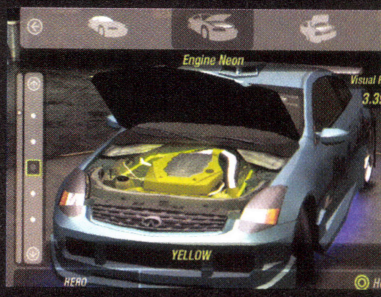
XBN 08
OUT OF TEN



PARTY **ON!**

While the online modes in *Need for Speed Underground 2* aren't exactly revolutionary, the game features all the Xbox Live trappings you'd expect. Available are online versions of the game's major race modes, including circuit, drag, and street x, for up to four players. (Strangely, only the "underground racing league" supports six players.) The best online experience by far is the outrun mode, where those in the lead try to lose their competition in the serpentine streets of Bayview. //







The Pontiac GTO: 350 hp, V8, and all-American metal, baby.



OUTRUN 2

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** // DEVELOPER: **AM2** // PLAYERS: **1-4** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$39.99** // ESRB: **E**

Return of the quarter muncher

Only two things mattered in *OutRun*: Beating the clock and selecting which soundtrack to listen to while you were doing it. That's it. That's *OutRun*. Or, at least, that was *OutRun*, Sega's 1986 coin-op classic.

Happily, little has changed for the update. The core game still offers a selection of branching routes with increasingly brutal time allowances, depending on whether you choose to go left (always easier) or right (where the difficulty increases) on your way to the champagne finish.

Sega's injection of different characters who hop in the driver's seat adds some camp value—the protagonists manage to look like Sims hopelessly marooned in the '80s. And should you fail to reach the finish line, the hot chick in the passenger seat not only berates you, but also launches a frenzied and endless attack on your noggin, arms flailing. She's a keeper.

There's also a bunch of different modes to add variety, but none of them are particularly compelling. The addition of a competent Live game makes for some fun competition, though racing against any fewer than four opponents equals a traffic-thin and dull ride.

So the emphasis here is on the basics: perfectly executed powerslides, blistering speed, and traffic dodging. The end result is an experience every bit as thrilling, addictive, and shallow as the original. It sits somewhat uncomfortably alongside the expansive likes of *RalliSport Challenge* and *Burnout 3*—its core gameplay harkens back to a time when mastering a single technique with a single car was all that mattered (and rolling up your jacket sleeves was socially acceptable). //
Simon Cox





XBN 08 OUT OF TEN

COLIN MCRAE RALLY 2005

PUBLISHER: **Codemasters** // DEVELOPER: **Codemasters** // PLAYERS: **1-8** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$29.99** // ESRB: **E**

McRaecing made mellifluous



LIVE

RALLY ONWARD

This time for *Colin McRae Rally 2005*, Codemasters hasn't skimped on the multiplayer: Up to eight players can have at it (in ghost-car form) on any of the tracks in the game. *RalliSport Challenge 2*'s fancy tournament options are nowhere to be seen, but it's still a fine online effort.

There's little to no market in the United States for European rally games, so it's a surprise to see Codemasters take the opposite route from Microsoft, making a rally game pleasing the hardcore, almost at the expense of everyone else.

The fifth game in the series, and the second to go Stateside in six months, *Colin McRae Rally 2005* is showing signs of *Madden NFL*-style rehashing. There's a new country (Germany) to race in this time, and all the other areas have two new stages, but this still means that a good half of the tracks here were already seen in *Colin McRae Rally 04*. The clean, white Ikea-like interface is mostly borrowed from the previous installment, and the same Irish copilot is back, although he's remarkably more intelligible to American ears now.

Despite all this, *2005* is still the strongest entry in the series and a serious contender for *RalliSport 2*'s plastic folding chair of a throne. Why? For one, the graphics are a night-and-day improvement—this is the first *McRae* to include real weather, real shadows, and other little effects taken for granted in other racers. The career mode gives you more room to choose your next race, making single-player driving far less linear and frustrating. Most important of all: The incredibly precise car controls, as well as the deviously realistic difficulty level, which is impossible to find anywhere else in racedom. If you're ready for *RalliSport Challenge 3* right this minute, either buy this or prepare to wait for a long, long time. //
Kevin Gifford





XBN 08 OUT OF TEN

ULTRA BUST-A-MOVE

PUBLISHER: **Majesco** // DEVELOPER: **Taito** // PLAYERS: **1-2** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$19.99** // ESRB: **E**

Ultracandy for the Live Generation

The puzzle-game robber barons behind this ubiquitous franchise stopped numbering these things years ago: Although this is the inaugural Xbox outing for *Bust-A-Move*, it's actually more like *Bust-A-Move 37*. You'd expect this simple game of aiming and matching like-colored bubbles to feel awfully flat by now, yet amazingly, the bubble-popping action here remains refreshingly effervescent.

Series vets will quickly blow through the simple arcade mode in 30 minutes, but developer Taito wisely adds several new single-player modes, cleverly twisting the formula. All three devilishly wreak havoc on your expectations. Seesaw mode slaps violent physics onto the board, tilting the playfield to the left or right as you place bubbles there. Blind mode forces you to shoot bubbles into an unknown minefield of masked colors, infusing serious unpredictability into the mix. Finally, shot mode (which other recent versions have included) gives you one crucial, nerve-wracking shot to clear a stage. All of these variants require you to learn new techniques and strategies to succeed, ultimately adding hours of replay to an otherwise simple puzzler.

A slew of versus modes (with Xbox Live play—see sidebar) complement the gratifying solo play: The traditional versus mode joins two new contests (count and color modes) for even greater variety. While not as inventive as the single-player additions, these new styles offer a slower, more strategic style of play allowing for more move-and countermove between combatants.

Ultra Bust-A-Move's tight, addictive gameplay succeeds with little help from its trappings: Busy backgrounds and dopey-looking characters combine to form a tacky pastel mess, and the soundtrack oscillates between innocuous light jazz and horror-show circus-themed music. Ugh. //

Shane Bettenhausen



Taste the rainbow, sucker. Taste it!



BUBBLE UP **ONLINE**

When you're tired of all that monster fragging, you can relax in the pastel paradise of *Ultra Bust-A-Move*'s online play. Pop spheres in any of the game's three versus modes, with full support for the Xbox Live communicator, friend lists, Xbox Live Aware, and real-time global rankings.

KING ARTHUR

PUBLISHER: **Konami** // DEVELOPER: **Krome Studios** // PLAYERS: **1-2** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$39.99** // ESRB: **T**

Somewhere between Excalibur and Excaliburgers

***King Arthur*'s destiny, after debuting last July in third place behind *Spider-Man 2* and *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*, was to become a second-tier fantasy movie...and now, a fairly second-rate game.**

More or less following the movie's plot of handsome Englishmen (and blue-hued barbarians) fighting evil Saxons, *Arthur* is an out-and-out copy of Electronic Arts' last two *Lord of the Rings* beat-em-ups. Period. This is not necessarily a bad thing—it means movie clips cutting right into gameplay, voiced dialogue in the middle of battle scenes, and enough sword swinging to make your right arm look like Arnold Schwarzenegger's circa *Pumping Iron*. To this you can add a few sequences on horseback and a two-player arena mode featuring all your favorite movie characters dueling in places filled with spinning blades and other hazards.

Sounds like all the ingredients for ripping adventure in ye times of olde, right? Well, yes...except you can't help but compare *Arthur* to the *Rings* library. Do that, and you'll find outdated graphics, unhelpful computer-controlled allies, and a general sense of hack-and-slash ennui making *Arthur* just as nonstirring as the film was to a post-*Rings* audience. //

Kevin Gifford


Take that, dyed barbarian!

XBN 07 OUT OF TEN

XBN 05 OUT OF TEN

ESPN NBA 2K5

PUBLISHER: **Sega** // DEVELOPER: **Visual Concepts** // PLAYERS: **1-4** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$19.99** // ESRB: **E**

Prime-time hoops

The first thing you're going to notice about this game is how unbelievably gorgeous it is. ESPN's football title beats Electronic Arts' graphically, and this one is no different. Unfortunately, ESPN doesn't throw in a slam dunk contest, like EA does, but as the man says, no harm no foul. You're still getting solid gameplay here.

With great player models and a more accurate sense of movement, *ESPN NBA 2K5* is a solid basketball game that feels great to play and looks incredible. If you played *ESPN NBA 2K4*, you'll note there are new passing and shooting animations in the latest version. The flourish of a well-executed fadeaway is all the more satisfying when it looks authentic. IsoMotion2 technology—if nothing else, Sega loves its jargon—improves player locomotion, giving the user more control than last year. From the mesh-textured uniforms that dampen with sweat to the ESPN cut-scenes replaying on the highlight reels, *2K5* creates the illusion you're participating in a real game, and it is sweet indeed.

Some small things in *2K5* feel unnecessary, like the game's "street" mode. It's not particularly bad, it's just that it plays a lot like the normal professional games, except with a different look, fewer rules, and no refs. After experiencing games such as *NBA Ballers* and *NBA Street*, which take many, varied, and wacky liberties with basketball, the *ESPN* "street" mode comes off as dry and feels as though *2K5* is trying to be everything—which is entirely too much—at once. It would have been more useful if the development team had dedicated its resources to coming up with a great-looking slam dunk contest—one that's playable online—as a certain competitor did. //

Jason Allen

XBN 08
OUT OF TEN



LIVE

HYPE AND HOOPLA

Expect a nice amount of content in *ESPN NBA 2K5*'s online mode, including the 24/7 mode, which has more than 100 items to collect this time around. Real-time statistics and the standard buddy list features help to keep you in contact with all the other *ESPN* loyalists out there. Yep, all 12 of them (just kidding guys).







For his fine play in the paint, Alexander Hamilton (shown below) had his visage put on the $10 bill.



MEN OF VALOR

PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Universal** // DEVELOPER: **Fun Labs** // PLAYERS: **1-12** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **M**

Men of almost constant sorrow

Like the *Medal of Honor* games it borrows so heavily from (no surprise, since developer 2015 is largely made up of Electronic Arts veterans), *Men of Valor* works best when it makes you feel like you're playing a war movie. Sure, some clichés may give 'Nam film buffs flashbacks (torching villages, the ol' "water buffalo in the road" booby trap), but when you're crawling in on your belly to take out a machine-gun bunker, artillery shells blasting all around, it doesn't matter how many times you've seen it before—the adrenaline gets pumping. Solid controls and a unique health system (hold a button to stop bleeding, and pick up canteens from dead enemies to restore life) make some of the longer stretches of repetitive gameplay more tolerable. The later levels vary the action a bit better, too, as you get out of the jungle and into the burned-out rubble of urban environments for some intense firefights.

But even when the game's action gets all John J. Rambo, the A.I. remains more like Gomer Pyle. Always having your squad alongside—barking orders, crying for help, taunting and cursing—sounds great...until you see them actually fight. Fellow Marines run up to enemies, often with no cover, and sit a few feet away while both sides plug away, neither falling. Some awkward cut-scenes and the generally stiff animation likewise make the whole experience less immersive. And while using the terrain defensively is always a must (ducking and leaning are actually important, for once), sometimes there's no way to stop from being shot, causing the difficulty to spike suddenly. A robust multiplayer game, which offers different roles for you to play as (à la *Return to Castle Wolfenstein: Tides of War*), decent level designs, and a few fun capture-the-flag variations, adds value, but not enough to fully redeem these *Men*. //

Mark MacDonald

XBN 06 OUT OF TEN



ProTip: Aim at foes, not directly beneath them.



WAR IS NOT **HELL**

Despite its 12-player limit, *Men of Valor* includes a robust online experience. After choosing a character class, the U.S. and V.C. soldiers can go at it in traditional challenges, as well as a mode where each side tries to locate three parts of a mortar first or a cool mission-based game type (plant a bomb on a tank, etc.).

VIETCONG: PURPLE HAZE

PUBLISHER: **Gathering** // DEVELOPER: **Coyote Developments / Illusion Softworks** // PLAYERS: **1-10** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$39.99** // ESRB: **M**

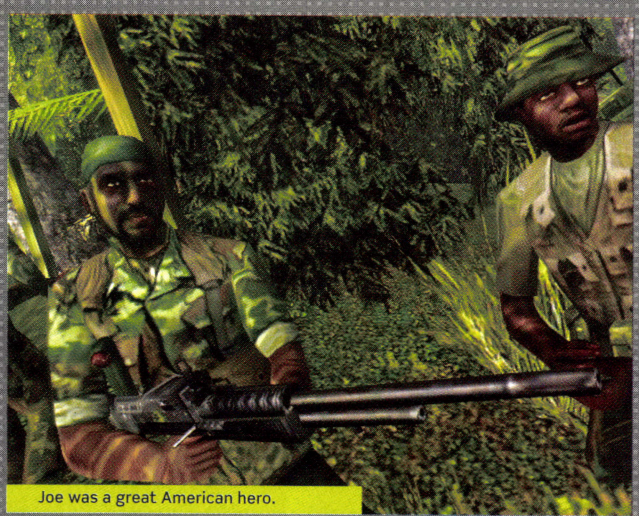
A strategic withdrawal

Vietcong: Purple Haze ships you to Vietnam, most popular of recent videogame hot spots, amid vaguely Hendrixian riffing and pointless cut-scenes, and has you take on 19 missions with a team of grunts at your side.

The graphics, while not incredibly impressive, do provide a feeling of immersion within a dense jungle. But the A.I. of your teammates is simply horrendous. In each mission, you'll assign your point man to guide your squad through the level, then watch as he wanders about aimlessly, sometimes seeming to forget your orders. The resulting frustration will cause you to race ahead on your own, blindly stumbling into enemy booby traps in a sort of maddening trial-and-error gameplay. Meanwhile, your other teammates do little to aid in your missions, with a medic who constantly gets in your way during battle trying to heal your wounds and gunners who rarely stick by your side.

Haze does have a few things going for it—there's a variety of weapons at your disposal, and a few period songs conjure the mood of the era. But the entertaining Xbox Live portion of the game—allowing for 10 players in five different game modes—is really the only thing worth checking out here. //

Dan DiGiacomo



Joe was a great American hero.

XBN 04 OUT OF TEN

BLOODRAYNE 2

PUBLISHER: **Majesco** // DEVELOPER: **Terminal Reality** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **M**

It's raining...well, you know





Using aura vision, Rayne can see how much life-rejuvenating blood an enemy has in his body.

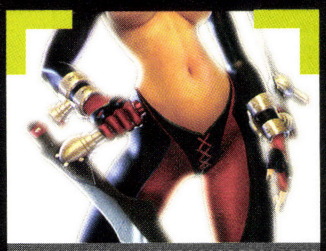
If you get a kick out of carving the limbs off goth kids and watching gallons of blood spurt from their black-lace-bedecked stumps, you might have a certain amount of fun with *BloodRayne 2*'s opening movements. Unfortunately, the massacre of the White Wolf geeks ends quickly, whereas the rest of Majesco's latest nightmare keeps going and going...

BloodRayne's design process seems to have comprised a huge list of ideas with no focus. Rayne has a gigantic selection of powers that don't work in any coordinated or interesting fashion. As in the first game, the usual response to a problem is to hammer on buttons until everything dies—the controls are too loose to enable a focused attack even if one were necessary. When a brick wall appears, the solution is invariably the gimmicky employment of some power that has no purpose besides solving that particular contrived puzzle.

The graphics are more focused when a nice layer of fog settles over well-lit urban environments. Some visual effects are badly overdone, though—*Rayne* doesn't have enough fatality animations to keep them from getting old fast—and some very frequently used animations look terrible. Rayne's jump move looks like she's being hoisted by an invisible crane. Worse still, the game reheats the same scenario again and again, with Rayne forced to toss shmoe after shmoe into a killing device until any hint of fun is sucked bone dry. //

David Smith

XBN 04 OUT OF TEN



PINUP GIRL

Majesco made much of Rayne's recent appearance in *Playboy*, even snagging a full page from *Xbox Nation*. That story raised an interesting question: Why did *Playboy* ask Terminal Reality to do a second job on its heroine's knockers and yet offer no complaint about her plastic-surgery-disaster face?

LEISURE SUIT LARRY: MAGNA CUM LAUDE

PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Universal** // DEVELOPER: **High Voltage Software** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **M**

The old college try...to get laid



MEET MORGAN

Larry pursues 14 women in his new game, most of them based on stereotypes. But then there's Morgan, the hot geek who may have a real-world counterpart in a certain host of the TV show *X-Play*. ("I don't know if I can hang out with someone I actually know in real life," she tells Larry. "I mean, shouldn't we IM or MMORPG a little first?")

Anyone who's been to college should relate exactly to the life of seventh-year junior Larry Lovage. The gorgeous coeds. The wild frat house. The arcade machine that personally insults you. The Porn Fairy who offers sex advice. Playing a game of quarters with your hot biology teacher's monkey to keep its relentless masturbating at bay. Okay, so maybe things are a little bit different at Walnut Log Community College. But it's all par for the course in the adult-themed adventure *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*.

Starring the nephew of Larry Laffer, *Laude* takes the *Leisure Suit Larry* series, which delighted PC (that's personal computer—definitely not politically correct) adventure gamers from 1988 to 1997, in a new direction. Gameplay drops the "find an item, use it somewhere" formula found in the original *Larrys* in favor of a handful of repeated minigames. Though generally fun, playing a *Tapper* redux and skillfully navigating a sperm to woo *Laude*'s lovely ladies grows quite tedious.

Thankfully, the old games' trademark humor returns—maybe even more so than ever—making you not mind that 10th *Space Channel 5*-esque rhythm sequence so much. Yes, much of the humor is very sophomoric, but in an *American Pie* way, not a forced *BMX XXX* one. It's all so well written, acted, and directed that such seemingly unfunny lines as "Are those my Funyuns?" will make you laugh as hard as any comedy you've seen this year could. Unless frank sex talk and the occasional set of female mammaries offends you, that is. And who cares if the game's honors are decidedly low? //

Chris Baker





XBN 07 OUT OF TEN

FILE UNDER L: AQUAMAN: THE BATTLE FOR ATLANTIS

PUBLISHER: TDK // DEVELOPER: TDK // PLAYERS: 1 // LIVE: NO // MSRP: $9.99 // ESRB: T

Seasickness...

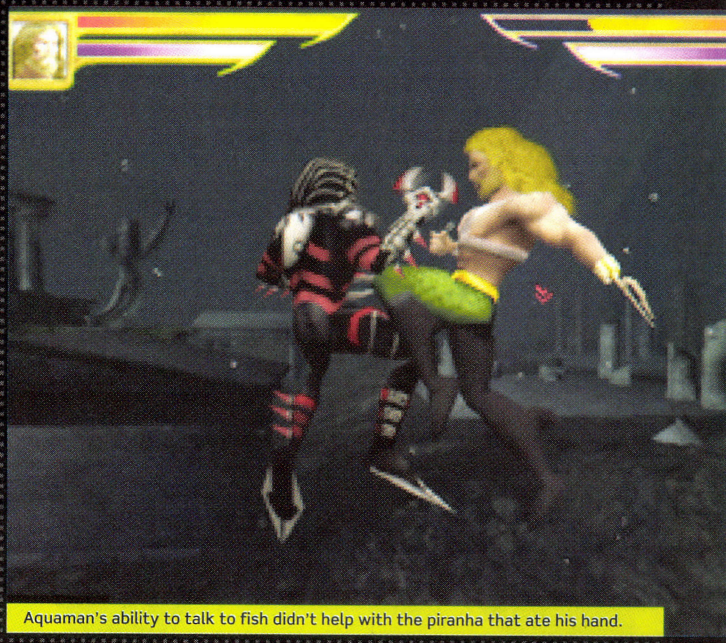
What we said then: Let's face it: Aquaman has always been the Art Garfunkel of the underseas set.

What we say now: You already knew this game was bad before you played it. In fact, when it hit the shelves, consumers were so sure they weren't interested by the time they read to the end of the word "Aquaman" that TDK would have been perfectly safe naming it *Aquaman: My PIN Number is 2762* or *Aquaman: Hey Kids, Fat People Should Be Eaten.*

Aquaman talks to fish. That's not a power; that barely qualifies as a waste of time. When scientists taught a gorilla sign language, the only thing they learned from it was that it thought bananas were pretty and it wanted one. Well, gorillas are 200 or 300 steps up the sophistication ladder—the smartest fish in the world might be able to put a sentence together well enough to ask Aquaman to dislodge the straggler from its caboose, if the meaning is plain.

Luckily, *Atlantis* barely focuses on Aquaman's amazing aptitude at fish linguistics. Instead, you swim through an undersea city starring 3D graphics from the year 1992 to battle the same underwater karate enemy 8 million times. When you do come across these enemies, the game switches from swim mode to combat mode. Swim mode is exactly what it'll be like when it's culturally possible to grab a saddle and pilot a spasming SCUBA child through the ocean by throwing candy in the direction you want to go. Fight mode requires a less complicated analogy to explain. It's like two ballerina corpses who've agreed to meet at the bottom of the sea to perform a one-act play mocking all electronic entertainment that has ever been.

If this game was just about a clumsy diver swimming around and punching people, it'd still be a monumental failure. The fact that it's awful AND based on the adventures of the Super Friend whose best weapon is being friends with electric eels—that's what will make its sucking last forever. // **Seanbaby**



Aquaman's ability to talk to fish didn't help with the piranha that ate his hand.





XTINCTION AGENDA

Character assassination made easy

No. 6: ZACK

Crimes against humanity: Being too funky for a world so unfunky as this; criminal misuse of an island
Appeared in: *Dead or Alive, Dead or Alive 2, Dead or Alive 2: Hardcore, Dead or Alive 3, Dead or Alive: Xtreme Beach Volleyball, Dead or Alive Ultimate*

When the original ***Dead or Alive*** hit arcades in 1997, few players even paid attention to Zack. He was merely a streetwise, self-taught Muay Thai fighter. He didn't seem particularly flashy in the company of gals endowed with colossal polygonal breasts that bounced and swayed as if controlled by some unseen force. A quick glance at Zack's bio revealed little to be concerned about: He's a DJ who likes to relax with a game of billiards and a tasty ice cream cone. The only hint of his future problems: an alternate costume covering his body in skintight reflective foil.

Dead or Alive 2 quickly eroded that likable nice-guy image, however, imbuing Zack with a "frank and funky" personality plainly evidenced by his obnoxious new green hair, silly goatee, random piercings, an oddly bra-like half-tank-top outfit, and a gaggle of annoying voice samples. By *Dead or Alive 3*, his story line had taken a turn for the tawdry: His previous tournament winnings squandered, he fights this time to finance a massive gambling trip to Vegas. Meanwhile, oldster Gen Fu fights to buy medicine for his dying granddaughter.

Zack's downward spiral into creepiness bottomed out in the softcore volleyball fest *Dead or Alive: Xtreme Beach Volleyball.* Here, Zack—incomprehensibly voiced by basketball star Dennis Rodman—invites the ladies of *Dead or Alive* to his exclusive island resort (delightfully named Zack Island), where he lavishes expensive gifts on them, watches as they play volleyball in skimpy bikinis, and then sees his island explode. Here's hoping the shark that ate him didn't get indigestion. //



04 HOLIDAY BUYERS' GUIDE

25 XBOX GAMES AND GADGETS THAT PROVE YOU CAN BUY HAPPINESS AFTER ALL



Welcome

2004 will be remembered as the year Xbox took off. EA started making games with Live modes, we had *Splinter Cel: Pandora Tomorrow*, *Riddick*, *Halo 2*, *DOA Ultimate* and *Ninja Gaiden*, and surprises like Namco's excellent (but weird) *Breakdown*. All of which appear here, among others, as the games *Xbox Nation* unreservedly recommends should you find yourself flush with cash, or surrounded by rich friends this holiday season. We've also tagged those games that require Live connections, and thrown in a few gadgets too. Dive in.

HARDWARE

STUFF

RED VS. BLUE

www.redvsblue.com

The perfect cure for the seasonal suicide rate spike, Roosterteeth Productions' Halo-based comedy is fast attaining classic status. It chronicles the life and times of two opposing squads of SPARTAN's defending a deserted outpost. And when we say defending, we mean goofing off, accidentally killing their teammates and holding some pretty strange conversations with vehicles. Available in lo-res as downloads, or on DVD.



HEADPHONES

Sony MDR-DS3000 Home Cinema Cordless Headphones: $299.99

If you're only going to play one Xbox game this year, make it *Halo 2*. And if you really want to do it right, may we recommend these wireless bad boys from Sony. Unofficially endorsed by Bungie, this was the unit used to demo the latest adventures of Master Chief, plus it features fantastic bass response. Of course, we trust you'll be playing more than just one Xbox game this year. But you never know... //



HALO 2

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** // DEVELOPER: **Bungie** // PLAYERS: **1-16** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **M**

LIVE
Recommended



If you buy one game this holiday...

Hmmm...sounds familiar.

Very funny. The topic of last issue's cover story—and now this one too, and the biggest thing to happen to Xbox since, well, *Halo*, is in stores as you read this.

I know. I'm playing it.

So you know that some of the single-player game is set on Earth, following a Covenant invasion? And that they chose New Mombasa in Africa as their beach-head.

Yup.

And you've no doubt already encountered the giant Covenant robots that look like giant spiders. They can wipe out an entire unit, swat a Pelican dropship out of the sky and do some pretty serious damage to a Scorpion tank. They are, in a word, awesome.

Just killed one.

Nice.

Anything else?

Lots. For a start, as you noticed, your squad of marines work with you much more than they did before, and if you want to 'borrow' one of their weapons, you can just use your Master Chief rank to pull it from their sweaty hands.

Yeah, I know. I just took the sniper rifle from Sarge.

How'd he take it?

He wasn't thrilled.

You can also use a Covenant energy sword for a one-hit kill, and there are a number of other weapons changes—chief among them (no pun intended) is the new Assault Rifle and the ability to dual-wield. And, of course, now there's Live, so you don't have to lug your Xbox around for all those LAN parties when you want to play deathmatch.

LAN party?

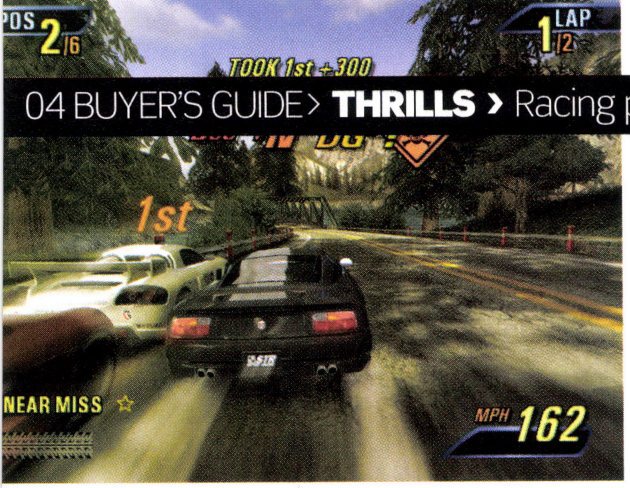
Don't worry about it. The point is that *Halo 2* takes Live further than any game to date. There's all the usual player-matching and communication stuff you'd expect, plus the new ability to form multiplayer clans and compete worldwide.

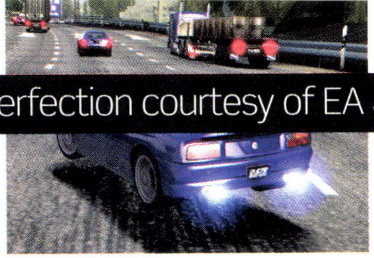
Sounds very Braveheart.

Except your clans (presumably) wear underwear, and everyone can read. The only minor disappointment is that you can't play co-op Halo 2 over Live. In HD mode,however, you can split the screen vertically, which almost makes up for it. We did say almost...















BURNOUT 3

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** // DEVELOPER: **Criterion** // PLAYERS: **1-8** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **T**

Walls, streets, crash

LIVE
Recommended

BUSTED!
In addition to the requisite online racing and ranking modes, *Takedown* features cooperative play. Pairs of players can sync their efforts in an attempt to try and accomplish the biggest, baddest crashes.

From hardcore sims (*Forza*) to straight-up arcade-style jaunts (*OutRun 2*), there's certainly no shortage of quality racing games available for Xbox—or any other console, for that matter. But when it comes to sheer adrenaline, you'd be hard pressed to find any racer that offers more interactive ecstasy per gallon than *Burnout 3: Takedown*. Ballsy, beautiful, and a blast to play, *Takedown* features a wealth of options, modes, and, of course, cars.

Yeah, but they're not real cars.

No, they aren't, although you can bet that now that EA's swallowed up developer Criterion, it's under careful consideration. Of course, getting car manufacturers to sign up might be a bit tricky—as you can see from the screens above, this game features the most lovingly detailed smashups you're likely to see this generation. And not only are they rendered in loving slow-motion, but you put them to your advantage as well, turning your airborne auto into a weapon.

Crashes? But I thought the point of racing games was, well, racing?

Relax. The shortest lap time still takes home the trophy, and to that end, *Takedown* serves up a healthy serving of speed—earned by driving like an absolute maniac—with more speed for dessert. In fact, hurtling through teeming city streets to the accompaniment of whining turbos can be so relentlessly harrowing that you just might fancy a good fender bender—if only to catch your breath.

Sparks = pretty.

Like that, don't you? Then you'll love the crash mode, the easy-to-learn, blast-to-master mode that's become the series' signature feature. Dozens of carefully constructed routes are dotted with unsuspecting cars and trucks, all just waiting for you to try and create the biggest pileup possible. Fun? Yes. Addictive? Absolutely.

OK, but what's that god-awful racket going on in the background?

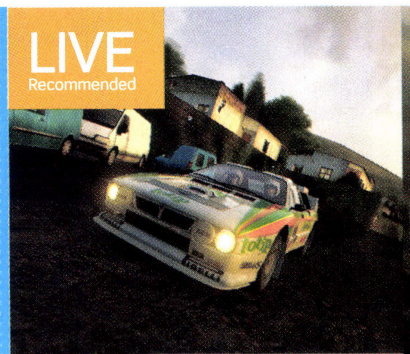
That, friend, is the sound of inevitability—otherwise known as EA Trax. But don't worry, even if you've grown out of the tortured, tweeny-bopper age bracket, you can still cycle through your own custom soundtrack. Hard drive, we love you. //

RALLISPORT CHALLENGE 2

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** // DEVELOPER: **DICE** // PLAYERS: **1-2** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **E**

The wheel deal

LIVE
Recommended







If you're looking for a rally racer on Xbox this holiday season, chances are you've done a bit of searching and have boiled your choices down to *Colin McRae Rally 2005* and *RalliSport Challenge 2*. For our buck, we recommend the latter, a gorgeous love affair with all things mud, sweat, and tears.

For starters, the game is a tad more arcadecentric than its direct competitor but without possessing dumbed-down gameplay or a stilted physics engine. As a result, the challenge here isn't struggling with maintaining control of your car, but rather mastering the nuance of how your car interacts with various track elements, be it dirt and rain or even intangible obstacles such as darkness from a busted headlight. Combined with able Xbox Live functionality, *RalliSport Challenge 2* is a must for those with a need for speed. //

HARDWARE

STUFF

WIRELESS CONTROLLER

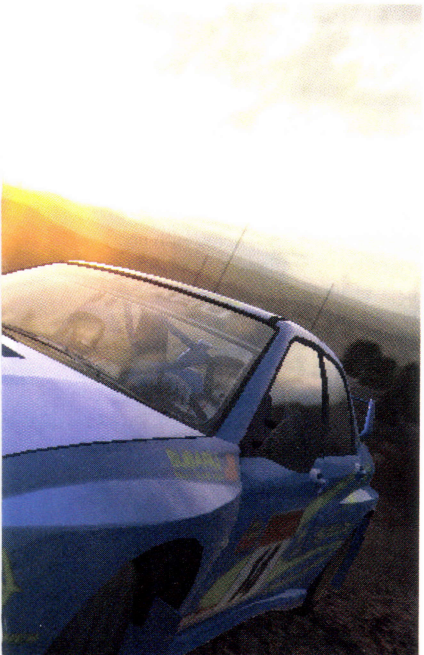
Logitech Cordless Controller: $50
If Gamera and Godzilla went head-to-head in *Halo*, you can bet Gamera would win—and not just because Godzilla is a stupid camper. He'd win because he'd be playing with the Logitech Cordless Precision Controller, which is like the Cadillac of Xbox controllers. Elegant and powerful, the Cordless Precision can be played up to 30 feet away from the Xbox and functions for up to 50 hours on two AA batteries. Take that, King of Monsters! //



WIRELESS ADAPTER

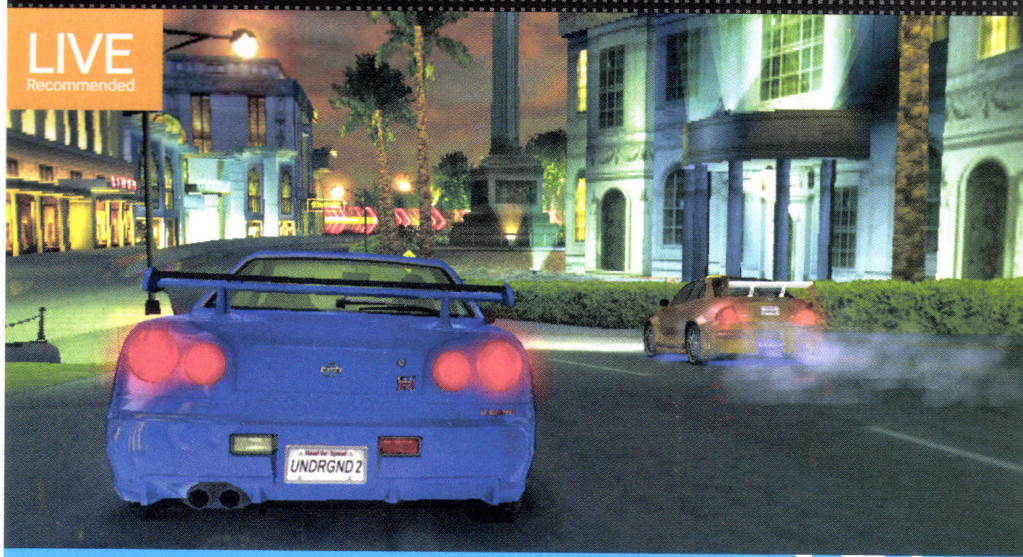
Microsoft Wireless-G Adapter: $110
This little black plastic wedge may seem innocuous, but in reality it's your ticket to freedom and a cord-free living room. It's a bit of a luxury item, but once you've gone wireless, you'll never go back. Now, about those controllers... //





NEED FOR SPEED UNDERGROUND 2

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** // DEVELOPER: **EA Canada** // PLAYERS: **1-8** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **E**



Calvin would like for you to unlock your gas cap

Another year, another *Need for Speed*...
Yo, check the cynicism. *Underground 2* brings both old and new back to your Xbox in a follow-up that's genre-breaking in its own right. Returning in the sequel are the no-brainers: import tuner rice rockets, hundreds of brand-name aftermarket parts with which to customize your ride, slick neon-lit asphalt, and a gaggle of polygonal race Betties who enjoy nothing more than to kick off the evening's automotive festivities.

So, who's the hottie on the game's cover?
That's Brooke Burke, the supermodel who turned gaming goddess this year when she agreed to star as Rachel, queen of the street racing scene in *Underground 2*. In the opening minutes of the game, she lends you her wheels (a souped-up 350Z) and the keys to the kingdom, so to speak.

If Brooke's the queen, do we get to be king?
That's entirely up to you. You're a stallion—and stallions must run free. *Underground 2* enables you to drive anywhere, anytime, in a vast urban environment frothing with race events, secret shops, and random hot-headed opponents. A handy GPS system makes sure you're never lost.

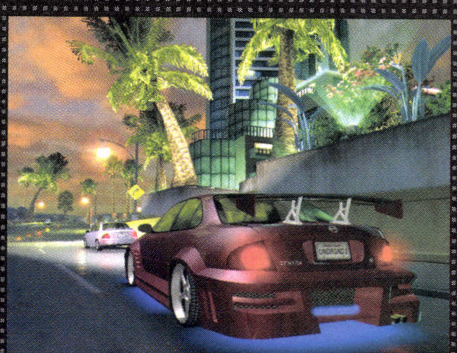
(Sigh) Looks like EA's caught the GTA bug...
And can you blame them? Here, it makes total sense. By opening the whole of Bayview City to the player from the get-go, *Underground 2* features exploration not found in any street racer to date.

You used the term "Car-PG" in your review.
Oh yeah, you can read that on page 91. But basically, *Underground 2* feels like a car-based RPG, complete with random encounters.

Do you get to kill slimes?
Not quite. Aside from the bevy of racing events you've come to expect (circuit, drift, street, drag) from an *Underground* entry, you can now challenge other night kids to on-the-spot "outrun" races. The objective? Simply lead your opponent by a certain distance and win money in the process.

Time to drop *Burnout 3* like a bad habit then?
Not quite. Although *Underground 2* is Live capable, the single-player experience is more rewarding than its multiplayer component, which feels a bit like an afterthought. Still, it's fun just to cruise Bayview with three other buddies who have customized their cars to look as ridiculous as possible. And by ridiculous, we really mean delicious. //





GUILTY GEAR X2 #RELOAD

PUBLISHER: **Majesco** // DEVELOPER: **Arc System Works** // PLAYERS: **1-2** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: $19.99 // ESRB: **T**



Beatdowns, Xbox Live, new school

Not sure what "Guilty Gear" means...

We don't know either. Other questions we can't answer: Why is the main character named Sol Badguy? Why is there nothing but heavy metal on the soundtrack? Why is that underage transvestite beating people down with a yo-yo? Why doesn't Capcom make a 2D fighter that looks this good?

That's a good question, why doesn't it?

Can't answer that one. *Guilty Gear*'s high-resolution characters and backgrounds have set the standard for close to four years, and *Capcom Fighting Jam* still looks all fiddly around the edges. The supersharp artwork lets Arc System Works get away with fewer animation frames (compared to *Street Fighter III*, say) and still make something that looks completely sweet.

Can non-ninjas apply?

The nifty thing about *Guilty Gear* is that you don't have to be a demented obsessive to have fun with it. Sure, you can become a demented obsessive, download reams of move lists and gigabytes of combo movies, and holler obscenities on Xbox Live all day, but that's not a prerequisite for an enjoyable fighting experience. The game still moves smoothly in the hands of an amateur, thanks to a fluid combo system and simple dashing. Most everything combos into anything, and you can hop like a *Marvel vs. Capcom* star on springs. Then, later on, you can work out what a "False Roman Cancel" is supposed to be.

Do I have to press a button to turn around?

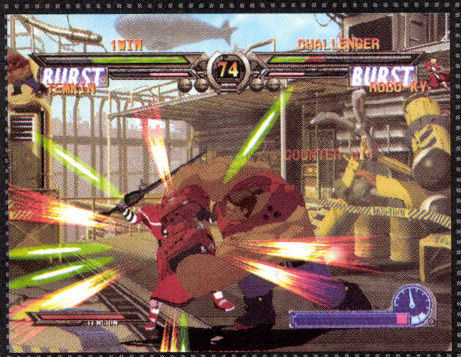
No, and thank God for that.

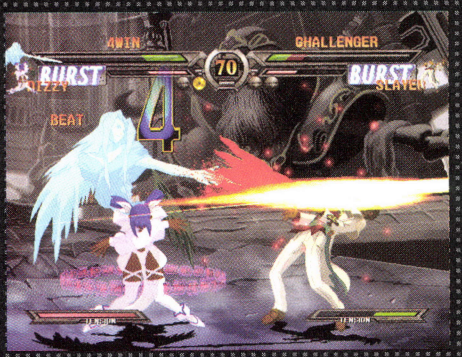
Great, but I can't decide between the yo-yo transvestite and the vampire with the monocle.

Isn't that always the way? For beginners, we recommend the Axl Rose look-alike or the fire-launching bounty hunter. Once you learn the ropes, you can graduate to the guitar-swinging honey in the red vinyl minidress or the gangly fella with the scalpel and the paper bag over his head. Iconoclasts can mess around with the cute pirate chick with the giant anchor or the gooey black thing named after the guy on all those Iron Maiden album covers.

Eddie.

Right. That guy. Daisuke Ishiwatari, the broken mind behind *Guilty Gear*, is the character designer, the game designer, and the voice of the main character. You can say what you like, but he loves his job. //





HARDWARE

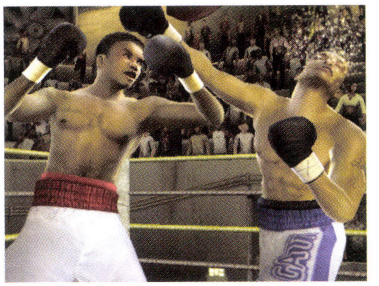
STUFF

PROJECTOR

Mitsubishi SE2U Projector: $999

There are a few HDTV's out there under a thousand bucks, but none can match the size and flexibility of this excellent projector from Mitsubishi. Want to play *DOA Ultimate* on your whole living room wall? Or, for that matter, turn the back of your house into the neighborhood's largest theater? Please, be our guest. The SE2U supports all the HDTV standards and features multiple inputs. So you can be sure your Xbox and DVD player will fit the big screen. And for the ultimate experience, don't forget to add some sweet 5.1 speakers. //





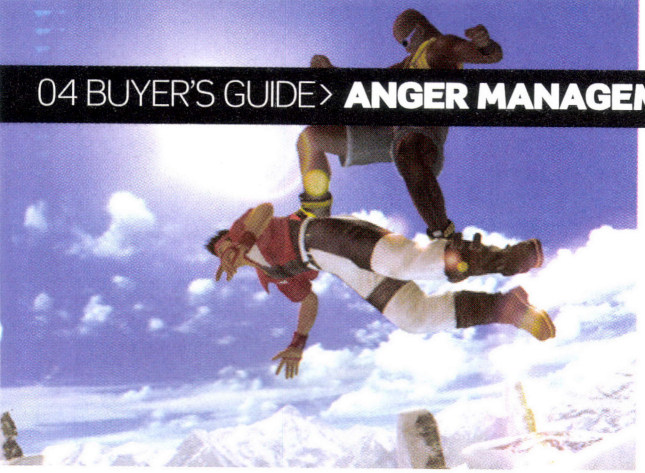
FIGHT NIGHT '04

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** // DEVELOPER: **Electronic Arts** // PLAYERS: **1-2** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **T**

Beatdowns, old school

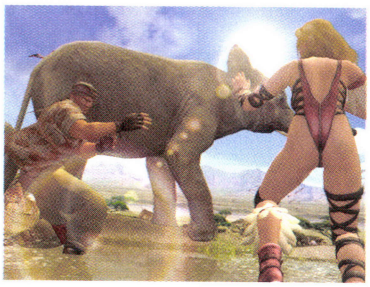
Everyone likes to throw a good punch now and then. But why do it in some back alley against a real person when you can engage in fisticuffs in the privacy of your own home with *Fight Night 2004*. At the very least, you won't have to serve any jail time for playing it—but *Fight Night* offers so much more than an alternative to incarceration.

There's an excellent career mode that takes you from the depths of boxing's no-name divisions to the title fight in Las Vegas. Plus, *Fight Night* features some of the very best gameplay of any boxing game to date thanks to a control scheme that uses the analog sticks to handle bobbing and weaving as well as punching. Easily grasped—but a challenge to master—this elegant control scheme really draws you into the fight. //











DOA ULTIMATE

PUBLISHER: **Tecmo** // DEVELOPER: **Team Ninja** // PLAYERS: **1-4** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **T**

Kicking. Asses.

They're, like, totally hot.
Don't be deceived. The scantily clad women from *Dead or Alive Ultimate* will never come to your house and bake you cookies, nor will they ask you your sign or laugh coquettishly at one of your dumb pickup lines—especially the one about them being a broken calculator always adding up to 10. And don't expect any of its buff dudes to come by and lift furniture for a few measly beers, either. These beautiful computer folk are built solely for brawling, online and off. And you'd be a moron if you didn't put them to work on your Xbox, as *Ultimate* compiles two *Dead or Alive* games in one neat Xbox Live-compatible package.

So one might say that *Dead or Alive Ultimate* forms a dramatic dyad?
If you were a college professor, yes. Both the original Saturn version of *Dead or Alive* and PlayStation 2's *Dead or Alive 2: Hardcore* are packaged here and can be played online.

Saturn?
It's like a PlayStation 1, only more dead. And from Sega.

Sure. Whatever you say.
The Saturn version of *Alive* never made it to the United States, and *Hardcore* has been gussied up for Xbox and now includes more, more, and also more. Indeed, Tecmo's added all-new stages, costumes, and fighting techniques, such as slope attacks, to Xbox's version of *Hardcore*. This means that now, the ninja Kasumi can, say, knock Bass down a hill, jump on his back, and ride the sucker like a surfboard—and do it while wearing a cute pink bikini. In addition to the full complement of competitors from the two included games, fighters from *Dead or Alive 3*, including Hitomi and Brad Wong, have also been added, ensuring the hits will be coming from many different fighters and many different directions.

Will my life be incomplete without it?
You will likely be shunned by your friends, all of whom will be engaging in face-mashing eight-player fighting tournaments on Live, if you do not buy this one for someone you love. Like, yourself.

Well, I do love myself. Like, a lot.
Well done. //

LIVE
Recommended

PRETTY!
A lot of work has been put into upgrading *DOA 2: Hardcore*'s graphics. It may be the PS2's *Hardcore* under the hood, but in motion, it's more like the Mona Lisa on roller skates. Know what we mean?

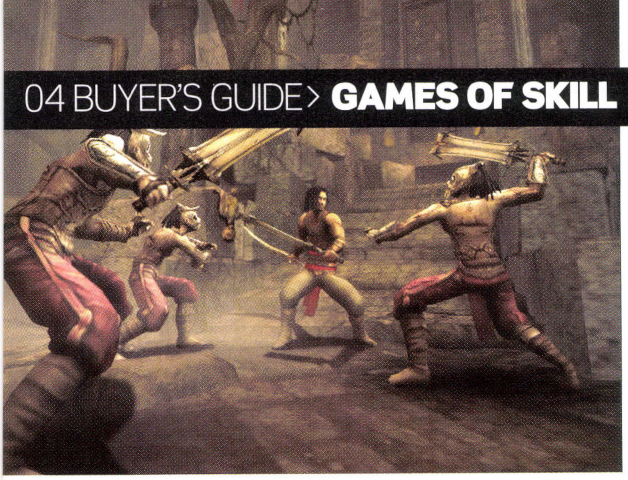
STREET FIGHTER ANNIVERSARY COLLECTION

PUBLISHER: **Capcom** // DEVELOPER: **Capcom** // PLAYERS: **1-2** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$29.99** // ESRB: **T**

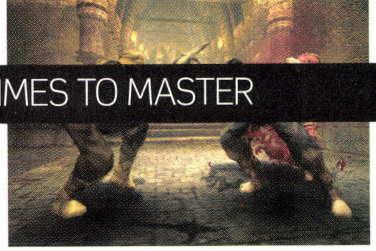
2D or not 2D

Anniversary Collection is an everything-and-the-kitchen-sink compilation of *Street Fighter II*s past—instead of keeping every game separate, all the characters from the first four variations get thrown into one pot. This is a little weird, and more than a little unbalanced in some cases. Jacked-up *Hyper Fighting* fighters get a bit of an edge over the vanilla originals. But it's easy to set a few house rules for party gaming, and experts can show off by winning with underpowered characters. Japanese gamers got the *Anniversary Collection* package last year. To make up for the wait, Capcom's throwing American fans the latest *Street Fighter III* along with the old-school revival action. And it's all playable over Xbox Live. //













PRINCE OF PERSIA: WARRIOR WITHIN

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** // DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft Montreal** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **T**

Hey, nice pants

JUMP!

Some of *XBN*'s favorite Princes, in no particular order: le Petit Prince, Prince William, Prince Skywalker, The Artist-Formerly known-as-the-Artist-Formerly known as Prince, the Prince (and that pauper, too), Prince Humperdinck, and Prince Albert (ouch!)

So is he king yet?

Nope. In the dozen or so game-years that have passed since *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, he's been driven from his homeland and relentlessly terrorized by a force stronger than we can imagine—the Dahaka. He hasn't slept. He hasn't rested. He hasn't loved. Now he's traveling across the world seeking out the Dahaka to improve his situation. He wants to change his fate, and he must go back in time to do it.

Is that all?

Well, that and watching lots of Jerry Bruckheimer movies, apparently.

Responding to complaints from his loyal fan base, the Prince took up a rigorous combat regimen with the personal trainer of such newly anointed action heroes as Ben Affleck and Tobey Maguire.

He now has a much wider assortment of moves and techniques, meaning that the fighting segments will be much more dynamic than they were in the first game. The second-to-second gameplay is now deeper and more user-friendly—something you'll feel immediately upon picking up the controller.

So more action, less puzzling.

Definitely. From a stylistic perspective, this Bruckheimer-inspired production is certainly more Michael Bay than Jordan Mechner. The camera cuts and dances frenetically, quite opposed to the measured, deliberate pacing of the last game. It's more sadistic, darker, and "edgier." It also features fewer logic puzzles, more cut-scenes, and more—many more—enemies.

To deal with the increased opposition, the Prince is now able to use a vast array of weapons split into four main classes; each class forces you to fight with different strategies. A huge hammer in one hand, for example, is better for taking out

NINJA GAIDEN

PUBLISHER: **Tecmo** // DEVELOPER: **Team Ninja** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **M**

A life of slice

You can go out and pick up *Ninja Gaiden* this holiday season, but know that you will never truly own the game. No, in fact, the game owns you. And you are reminded of this humble fact every time you download and play fresh content served straight from the sadistic mind of master ninja, action guru, and *XBN* contributor Tomonobu Itagaki. Called *Hurricane Packs*, these aftermarket modules modify your *Ninja Gaiden* experience (assuming you've already finished the game once—which is no cakewalk) by adding new weapons, costumes, monsters, and even more insidious A.I. to the proceedings. To show the true height of his cruelty, Itagaki has made the latest add-on a 15-minute struggle to survive a series of boss battles in the bowels of hell itself. But hey, it's no skin off your katana. Why? Because these downloads are absolutely free. //

LIVE
Recommended



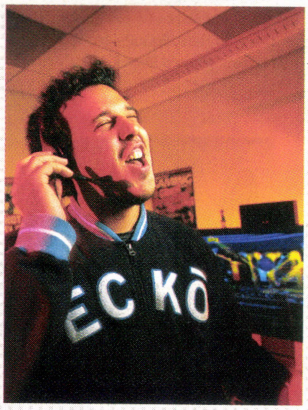
HARDWARE

STUFF

KARAOKE REVOLUTION

Karaoke Revolution: $40

Kids have no shame. But somewhere along the way, we get all uptight about singing and dancing our asses off in front of others. Konami has the cure. *Karaoke Revolution* is as simple as they come—sing your way to a high score—and therein lies the charm; anyone can play. And with downloadable tracks on the horizon, the party never need end. //



a bunch of surrounding enemies, whereas a couple of light swords are more suited for rapid slashing against a single enemy. The Prince can now throw enemies while engaged in a grapple and has much more interaction with his environment. Carefully timed wall jumps and spinning slashes around pillars are just a taste of his amplified repertoire.

Sounds brutal.

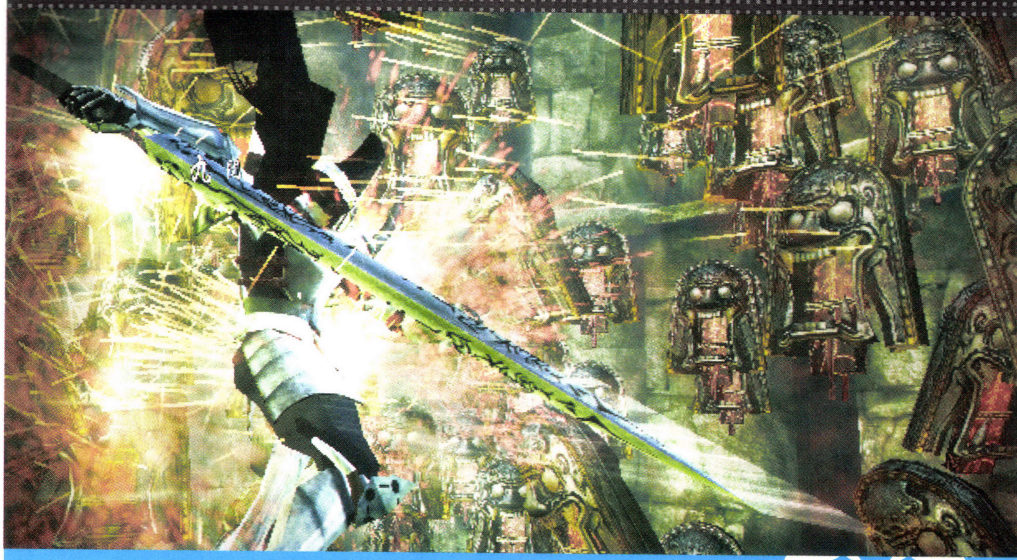
Kinda. No longer the easygoing laddie he once was, the Prince regularly spouts such one-liners as, "You better hope I'm not there!" and "You bitch!"

He also has new (less baggy) pants... //



OTOGI 2: IMMORTAL WARRIORS

PUBLISHER: **Sega** // DEVELOPER: **From Software** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$39.99** // ESRB: **T**



Immortality: the perfect holiday gift

Looks like we're late to the party. How is there already a sequel to a game we've never heard of?

One look at the unusual character designs and soft abstract environments in these screenshots should immediately tell you one thing: *Otogi 2* isn't American. No, in fact, it's one of the few Xbox games from Japan worth checking out. (The others—*Ninja Gaiden* and those naughty *Dead or Alive* games—you may already have in your library.)

A Japanese developer that's not Team Ninja made an Xbox game?

Right. And given the current (abysmal) state of Xbox popularity in Japan, finding developer support from a studio in its prime is pretty rare indeed. Which is why *Immortal Warriors* is such a special occasion. Picking up right where its predecessor left off, *Warriors* puts you in the armored kimono of six different demigods, each with the ability to devastate your mythical enemies, as well as the game's gorgeous surroundings, with a variety of exotic weapons.

In that case, I'll take six demigods with a side of sashimi, thanks.

Sure, just don't forget the wasabi. Experiencing *Otogi 2* is a lot like trying sushi for the first time, as it's just so entirely different than any action game you've ever played. As an immortal warrior on a mission from the heavens, you slay demons and absorb their essence to heal and maintain your own earthly form.

What's more, each of the six playable characters strikes a unique balance to the others; from Raikoh, the swordsman who's quick on his feet and brutal with a blade, to the bizarre Suetake, who's not much more than a floating tree stump with a preoccupation for laying down the smack.

Speaking of smack, the graphics here look absolutely insane.

Otogi 2's sublime art direction is an integral part of the experience, and a large part of why the game nabbed *XBN*'s game of the month award last issue. Every visual aspect of the game, from gold-laced palaces and candlelit temples to the hypnotic menu screens and the hand-painted enemy encyclopedia, oozes with superfreak style.

May your soul rest in peace, Rick James.

Amen to that. //





RIDDICK: EFBB

PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Universal** // DEVELOPER: **Starbreeze Studios** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **M**



Vin's number

No, not Vin Cheese-el...

As one high-profile developer so perceptively opined during lunch one day, Vin might not be the shiniest star on the Walk of Fame, but he's actually well suited for videogame acting. He's got the core game emotions down pat (those being anger, cheesy melodrama, and "I am shooting you with my gun"). Turns out he's also got a keen eye for development studios: The collaborative effort between Diesel's Tigon Games and Starbreeze Studios yielded the biggest surprise hit of the summer.

But the movie...

...is largely irrelevant in the grand scheme of things. *Escape from Butcher Bay* can be viewed and enjoyed completely independently of the *Riddick* cinematic flop. The story in the game probably would have made a better movie script, for that matter. From the opening scene when Riddick arrives at his new home to the climactic face-off against his tormentors at the game's finale, *Butcher Bay* is absolutely soaked in popcorn butter. But it's the dirty popcorn you find on the theater's floor: Environments are dark, desolate, and desperate; foul language flows as freely as the bloodshed; and its depiction of prison life in the distant future is pretty much based on prison life of the present—that is to say, not much fun.

But if prisons aren't fun, how can the game be?

Because you're escaping from it. The jailbreak begins as soon as Riddick is admitted as a guest: Gathering information from fellow inmates about whom to talk to and where Butcher Bay's weak points are must be done before the good old-fashioned killing can commence. There's a near-perfect balance between intel gathering, sneaking around, and full-on shooting, and thankfully there are plenty of distinct areas of the prison facility to prevent boredom. Oh, and Riddick keeps getting himself captured, so the story stays fresh.

Does it look as good as it sounds?

Butcher Bay is a perfect example of why having a clear artistic vision matters so much. Sure, the technology is there with all its bump-mapping and texture-filtering glory, but *Butcher Bay* uses light, shadow, and color to create a foreboding and gritty world that's way more convincing than Vin's onscreen Hollywood antics. //





HARDWARE

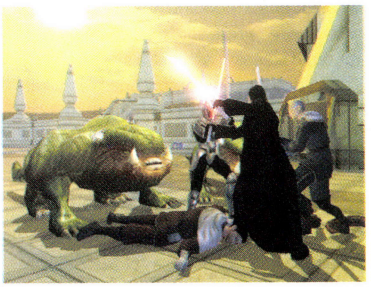
STUFF

5.1 SPEAKERS

Logitech Z-5500 Digital: $400

A game life lived sans surround sound and a nice subwoofer is a life half lived. Imagine theater-caliber audio—that booming bass, whizzing bullets, crystal-clear crashes—in your own home. With a 5.1 setup, you'll really *hear* the resounding BOOM! of cannons fired from (or at) your VT in *Steel Battalion* and the low rumble of a Covenant dropship as it swings in for a landing behind you. Coupled with a killer TV, it'll raise the hairs on your neck and bring a big fat grin to your face. Sounds good, huh? We had a feeling you'd hear it our way... //





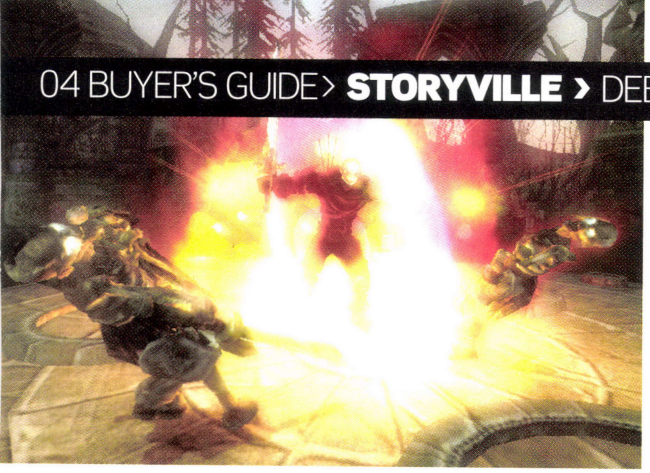
STAR WARS KOTOR II

PUBLISHER: **LucasArts** // DEVELOPER: **Obsidian** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **T**

Most impressive

The sequel to the original *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* will be like some delicious candy, an Everlasting Gobstopper of delight that could never be spoiled by such grotesqueries as hated moppet Jar Jar Binks or the "Yub-Yub" song from *Return of the Jedi*'s finale.

As a fallen-away Jedi during the time of the evil Sith's ascension, players get to storm the *Star Wars* universe pre-Luke Skywalker and Han Solo, make choices for good or ill, and either save the universe or help to destroy it. A word to the wise: This game has surprises that rival the first game's whole "Revan" revelation on its very first planet, so expect plenty of juicy plot twists and the odd betrayal to keep things interesting. Miss this one, and you'll be missing out on one of Xbox's greatest titles to date. //











FABLE

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** // DEVELOPER: **Big Blue Box** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **M**

Telling tale tales in days of olde...

You get old, then.
Yes, but there's more to *Fable* than wrinkles. It's the story of a man unlike any other. Perhaps he's the stuff of legends, the greatest hero ever to walk the face of Albion. Or maybe he's a dung heap of a no-goodnik, the sort of ill-mannered cretin who would steal candy from a baby and then sell the aforementioned sweets to an evil consortium at a tidy profit. You'll like this story, most likely. It's about love and hate and the wondrous joy of, uh...punting chickens.

Doesn't quite sound like the stuff from which the "greatest RPG ever" is born, does it now?
It is the stuff of legends, a fable for the ages. And while it might not all add up to the greatest RPG ever, it is a whopper of an adventure that should—by law—be played by every Xbox owner. At the heart of the game is the notion that you, as the central character, shape your destiny by making specific choices along the way. Are you good or evil? Will you employ the open hand or the clenched fist? Do you escort the trader to safety, rob him, or maybe escort him to safety and then rob him? Everything you do in *Fable* determines your hero's appearance (evildoers wind up looking like Marilyn Manson's tattoo artist) and inclinations—and directly affects how people perceive him. Become a saintly hero and the women will swoon. Fall to the dark side and expect people to run in fear.

So it's like real life, only with 40 percent more pixie killing?
If only your pathetic existence were as cool as *Fable*. There's a world to explore, a great mystery to solve, a tremendous evil to defeat. Demon doors block entry to wondrous treasures. An arena awaits the most dedicated of heroes, with amazing prizes awarded to the hero who defeats wave after wave of monsters. And you'll need to make a prison break if you hope to reach your greatest challenge.

One sec—I'll just grab my Sword of Soulmincing +1 and be right with you...
We'll wait. Frankly, this one is wondrous. And you'd be dumber than thumbtacks to pass it up. It's *Fable*. And it's brilliant. //

GO FISH

For the war-weary hero, there are plenty of minigames in *Fable* that serve to soothe a troubled brow. Go fishing for goodies, make a mad dash through town while showing off your trophies to as many of the little people as possible, or try your hand at bar games like Twenty-One.

BREAKDOWN

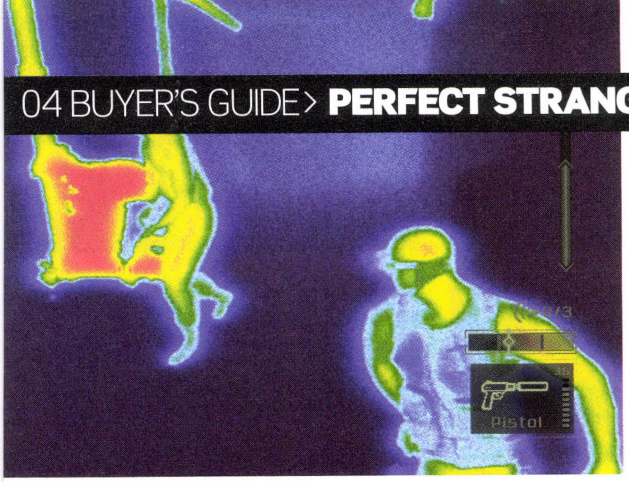
PUBLISHER: **Namco** // DEVELOPER: **Namco** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$19.99** // ESRB: **M**

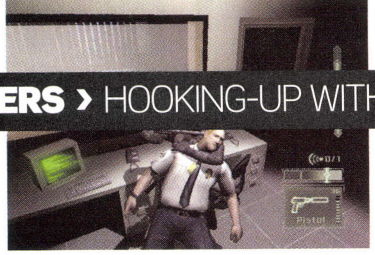
Punch! Puke! It's all in the mind...

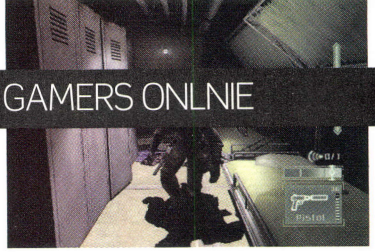
Few other games have managed to elicit the unwavering attention of the *XBN* staff—in the midst of deadline, no less—the way Namco's *Breakdown* has. Frustrating, uneven, and occasionally ugly, this East-meets-West Frankenstein's monster still manages to be one of the most engaging experiences to be had on Xbox. Don't be fooled by the first-person perspective; while there's plenty of shooting to be done, there's a whole lot more to this existential adventure, including first-person fisticuffs and plenty of psychedelia.

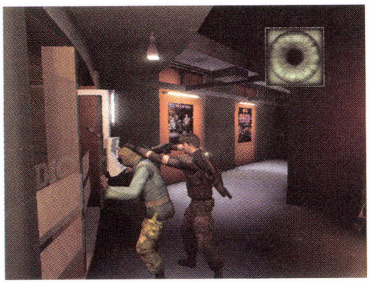
Players spend every in-game moment looking through the eyes of amnesiac Derrick Cole; in essence, everything that happens to him happens to you, too. It's ambitious—and not always well executed—and not quite like anything else. It's cool, it's compelling, and it can be had for around $20. So let the critics cry foul—it's the closest thing there is to getting into someone else's head. Well, unless you scoop out their brains first. //

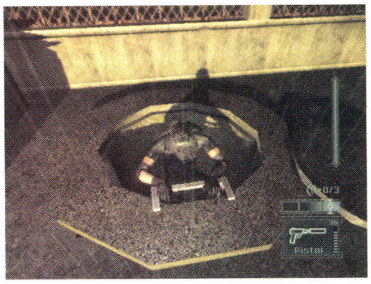












SPLINTER CELL PANDORA TOMORROW

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** // DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft Shanghai** // PLAYERS: **1-4** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **T**

Lights out

LIVE Recommended

CHAOS!
Sam Fisher, that sneaky SOB, sure does get around. His third Xbox appearance—*Splinter Cell Chaos Theory*—is in the works back at Ubisoft Montreal, and ships in March.

Hello?
We're here. You just can't see us.
Oh, right. Stealth.
Exactly. We're, like, paid to be invisible. *Pandora Tomorrow* (Ubisoft's follow-up to the game that keeps the *Metal Gear Solid* team up at night) is pure Tom Clancy: 50 percent techno-terrorist scaremongering and 50 percent eerily prescient. Set in the year 2006, lantern-jawed hero Sam Fisher must sneak his way through the jungles of East Timor, through France on a speeding train, weave his way through the streets of Israel and then back again to Indonesia and finally to L.A. for the big showdown with a renegade CIA operative. It's a bioterror thing.

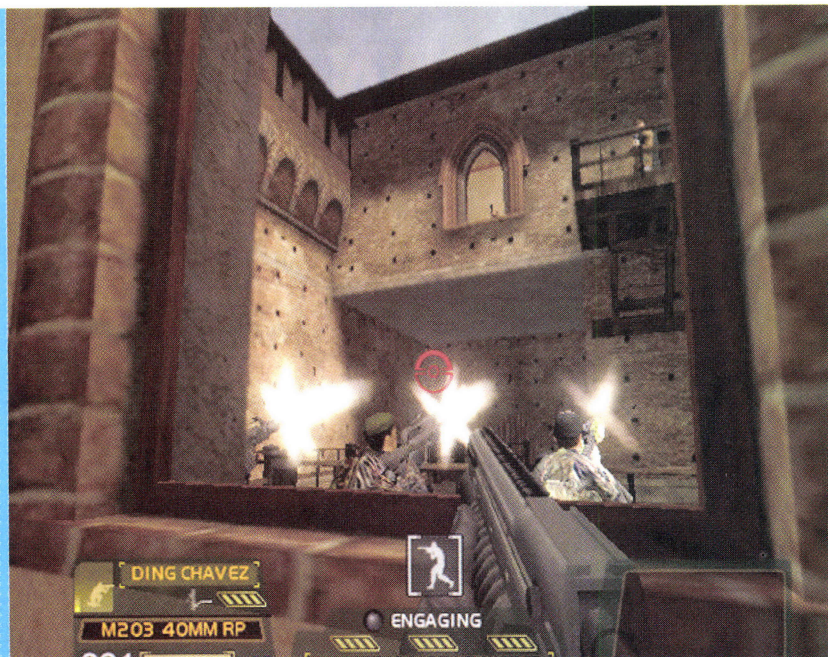
I'll be sure to bring cough drops. Is this one blessed with a Live mode?
Yes. It's a four-player game. No running around frantically emptying magazines into everything that moves. This game's not about deathmatch as usual. It's 2-on-2 espionage and counterespionage.
Spy versus spy?
Almost. Spies versus mercenaries. It's dubbed "Shadow Strike." The spy team has to work together to infiltrate a building and steal the plans/documents/embarrassing underwear out from under the noses of the mercs. Spies get to play from a third-person perspective (perfect for hiding in shadows and sneaking about), while mercenaries play in first person, armed with spy-catching gear. It's genius.
Sounds it. Anything else?
Yup. How about better enemy A.I. and level design? Alert the guards once and they don flak jackets—alert them twice and it's full-on helmets and combat gear, and you can forget about that head shot you're planning.
[*Click*] Er...I don't know what you're talking about.
Sure you don't. Anyway, the levels are much tighter, and the graphics create a virtually photo-realistic world to explore, filled with the flare of lights and the safety of shadows, black as tar.
Very poetic.
We aim to please. //

RAINBOW SIX 3: BLACK ARROW

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** // DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft** // PLAYERS: **1-2** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **M**

The price of freedom: $40

When liberty calls, the international Rainbow coalition answers with its modified MP5 submachine guns. *RS3* is long recognized as one of the best first-person shooters on Xbox Live, and *Black Arrow* continues the series' tradition of walking that fine line between tactical realism and frenetic fun. Offline, you slip into the Kevlar vest of Ding Chavez, America's killing machine who leads a multinational team of operators into politically sensitive hot spots. Sorties range from disarming bombs and rescuing hostages to wiping out terrorists in their dens. But it's on Xbox Live that the *Rainbow Six 3* experience sees full fruition. Campaign missions can be played co-op online, while adversarial combat comes in both free-for-all and team varieties. Outside of *Halo 2* (duh), *Black Arrow* remains one of the most compelling reasons to play on Live. //



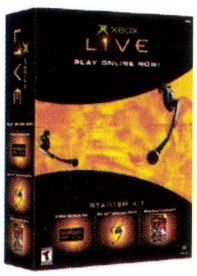
HARDWARE

STUFF

XBOX LIVE

Xbox Live Starter Kit: $70

For little more than the price of a single game, Xbox Live doubles the value of your games library. Enemy A.I. can get tough in single-player games, but it will never be as unpredictable, clever, and—well, vocal—as the real thing. Xbox Live enables instant access to fresh blood, along with voice-chat functionality for real-time strategizing and sweet, sweet postvictory smack talk. Your Xbox Live account also ensures that your games grow with you; more and more game patches and downloadable content are being released every week. Play outside the box; it's a one-way trip. //





FULL SPECTRUM WARRIOR

PUBLISHER: **THQ** // DEVELOPER: **Pandemic** // PLAYERS: **1** // LIVE: **No** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **M**

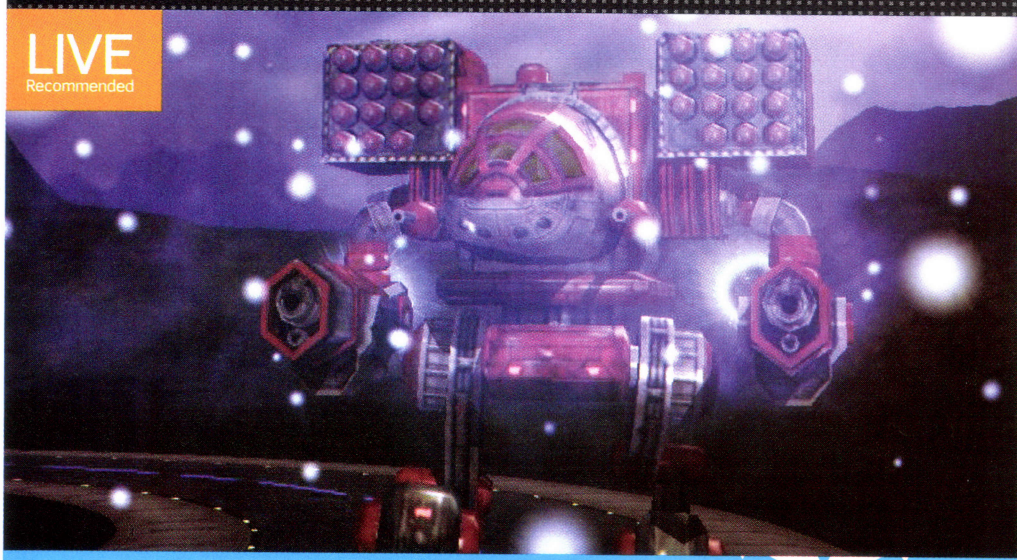
Think tanks

Equal parts a lesson in current events, urban military tactics, and actual game features, *Full Spectrum Warrior* takes a fairly realistic approach to modern combat, in that battles are not won by a solitary übersoldier, but by efficient teamwork and careful planning. Its setting, a fictional conflict in the Middle East and pursuit of a renegade dictator, also has the interesting side effect of being somewhat educational. As you are removed from direct control over individual actions, you become more tactician than foot soldier, and it's this blend of FPS and RTS that makes *Full Spectrum Warrior* unique. //

MECHASSAULT 2: LONE WOLF

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** // DEVELOPER: **Day 1 Studios** // PLAYERS: **1-16** // LIVE: **Yes** // MSRP: **$49.99** // ESRB: **T**

LIVE Recommended



And pass the Mega-Pepper, while you're at it...

So what are we talking about here, just more mechs and maps?

Of course, the entire original lineup of mechs (including the downloadable ones) and six brand-new mechs will be available. But what was once old is now new—each of the two-legged tanks has been modified and enhanced to spice things up.

Naturally, the sound and graphics will be worlds better, right?

Naturally. Because players will be leaving their mechs to travel on foot, they'll get a chance to take a bug's-eye view of these new, intricately detailed mechs and vehicles. Everyone's favorite explosion, the mech meltdown, now rips the ground with a shockwave. And if you have a Dolby 5.1 system, you're going to need a seat belt to keep yourself strapped in to your La-Z-Boy, because from the insane thumping of running mechs to the pressured detonation of high explosives, there ain't a whole lot in *MechAssault 2* that's not high impact.

"Travel on foot"? Sounds like *Halo* to me...

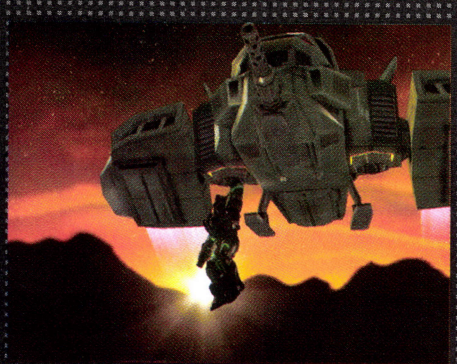
Not quite. But why not? How else are little mech-driving dudes going to get on board tanks, aircraft, and other armored vehicles? Yes, feet make a big comeback. Strapping on some battle armor (the successor to the elemental armor) allows players to cyber-jack battlemechs. Jump up on a mech and challenge the pilot to a code-breaker test—not unlike the game *Simon*—to see who gets to ride and who gets to walk.

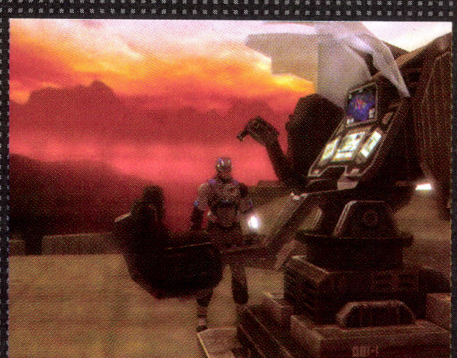
Good thing I left my high heels at home. So what's new for Live, then?

A new multiplayer mode, conquest, combines your standard multiplayer modes into one full-fledged campaign. Here, players pledge their allegiance to one of five houses (Davion, Kurita, Liao, Marik, and Steiner), competing for control of the very galaxy itself against all comers.

Battle of the planets. Cool.

Very cool. The galaxy is composed of contested planets, each of which has a particular game type that must be played to win control of it. Whichever house wins the required ratio of battles wins the planet. As players move between planets, they must master each of the different game types, or their house will suffer. And with clan support and online stat tracking built in, you've got Atlas-sized bragging rights just waiting for you. //





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